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The Man From Black Coulee

by WALT COBURN

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THE MAN FROM BLACK COULEE

by Walt Coburn

Some men spend their lives searching for gold. The cowboy called Jones searched the Badlands for a greater prize—the clue to his hidden past . . . and the right to ride and fight under his own name. . . .

ON A CERTAIN September day in 1917 the sheriff of Black Coulee, Montana, took the mail over to the jail. He handed a letter bearing the United States seal and stamped "War Department" in the upper corner, to Frank Galt. Frank was in for horse stealing and cattle rustling and was to be sentenced the following day. He'd draw five to fifteen years, and since he was twenty years old, the sentence would rob him of the best years of his life.

"This come forwarded from the Bar R Ranch, Frank."

Frank Galt opened the envelope and scanned the typewritten contents of the letter. A queer sort of grin twitched at his mouth.

"Hell."

"What's the matter, son?" asked the white-haired sheriff.

"I'm called to appear before the draft board. I'm called to war. Me, due to go to Deer Lodge for fifteen years. And it says here that there's a penalty for not appearin' for examination. Hell of a joke, eh, sheriff?"

There was bitterness in the young cowboy's voice and his gray eyes had hardened.

"Take 'er easy, Frank."

"I'll have fifteen years of doin' just that, Sheriff. Takin' 'er easy. Makin' horsehair bridles in the pen."

He turned his back on the sheriff and walked to the barred window. He could see out across the rolling prairie towards the distant range of mountains. Beyond them lay the badlands and the muddy Missouri River, its banks lined with giant cottonwoods and red willow thickets and wild roses. The chokeberries would be ready to eat after the first frost. The white-tail deer would be coming at

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daylight to water, there at the long sand bar, and maybe a blacktail buck, too, from back in the badlands. Mebbyso his new horns would still be in the velvet. . . .

Frank never had been much of a hand to hunt. But he liked to watch the deer and other wild animals. He had been born and raised there on the river. Orphaned when he was six, he had been cared for by Pete La Fors. Pete was a Cree 'breed who had the place just across the river from the Galt ranch. Pete hauled wood and trapped in the winter and played the fiddle at the dances. He had a liking for moonshine whiskey and beef that didn't wear his brand. Now and then he did a little horse stealing and whiskey peddling. A big, straight-backed old rascal, Pete La Fors, with twinkling black eyes and a hearty laugh; never quite sober, seldom very drunk, he ran his still and followed his trap lines and operated a way station for men who rode the outlaw trail.

Jim Galt, Frank's father, had been in a sort of partnership with Pete La Fors until he was drowned one spring trying to cross some horses when the river was high. Frank, thus orphaned, for his mother had died when he was four, had managed until the water went down enough for Pete to get across in his skiff. Pete and Frank, on opposite sides of the wide, muddy river, had seen Jim Galt and his horse drown in midstream.

Somehow Frank was reminded now of that spring day. He remembered the lonely ache that had been in his heart, and old Pete's booming voice calling across the river to him.

"By gar, Frankie, she's de damn bad luck, eh? But some time every man he mus' die. Bimeby, wan week, mebbyso two week, de rivaire she'll go down. Den I get h'in de skiff h'an come for you. Till I'm come across you h'eat de bean h'an de meat h'an take good care h'of de horse. She's de damn bad luck 'bout Jeem. But soon you make de fon with h'ol' Pete La Fors. Me play dat *Red Rivaire Jig* por you."

Pete La Fors had been father and mother to the orphaned boy. So when some stolen cattle and horses were found at Pete's place, Frank had taken the blame despite the old man's protests. Pete was too old to live more than a month if he was locked up. Pete had attended the trial. This morning he had shaken hands with Frank Galt, then had started for the ranch on the river, looking very old and bent and drunker than he had been in many years.

"I'll be back with your supper after a while, Frank," said the grizzled old sheriff. "Mind lettin' me have that draft letter?"

"Take it along, Sheriff. God knows I got no need for it."

In an hour the sheriff was back at the jail with a tray that held thick steak and fried potatoes and corn on the cob, besides pie and ice cream and black coffee. He handed the draft letter back to Frank.

"You'll need it when you report at the county seat, son. I've had a talk with the district attorney. You're

gittin' your choice of goin' to Deer Lodge to the pen, or goin' to war. And I reckon you'll take the war."

Frank Galt gripped the steel bars of his cell door. His eyes were misted. His voice, when he spoke, was husky with emotion.

"You . . . done this for me, Sheriff?"

"I managed to have you called by the draft. And it wasn't hard to talk the D.A. over to my way of thinkin', especially after what Pete La Fors told us in the D.A.'s office this mornin'."

"You're a real white man, Sheriff."

"Tie into that grub. Git shaved and ready to go to Chinook on tonight's train. I'll go with you, bein' as I'm responsible for you. And after you scalp the Kaiser and git back home, we'll git you a new trial. I'm your gardeen, sort of. I'm responsible for what you do, Frank."

Frank Galt held out his hand, a wide grin on his tanned face. "I won't do anything to make you sorry for what you've done for me, Sheriff."

THE time that followed was like a dream to young Frank Galt. Training camp. Discipline. K.P. duty. Inoculations and vaccinations. Drill and ever more drill. The hot hours out on the rifle range. The rain and muddy drill grounds at Camp Lewis, Washington. It all sped by so fast that Frank's head almost spun.

And then came the troop trains east, and the midnight sailing aboard a camouflaged transport. Crap shooting and poker below decks. Submarine scares. And then at last Brest and more mud and rain. While ever the troops marched up to the front, and others came back, faces gray with fatigue and strain. While still others came back in mud-spattered ambulances, twisted smiles on their faces.

That was the war as Frank Galt saw it. It was all strange and bewildering to the cowboy who had spent his life in lonesome places. He wrote letters back to the sheriff and Pete La Fors and tried to give them a picture of it all.

"From the way I read the sign," he wrote, "I reckon we are due to be moved up to the front tomorrow. . . ."

That was the last letter the sheriff and Pete La Fors got from Frank Galt, now Corporal Frank Galt.

Blackness and mud. Rain that slid down the back of a man's neck in ice-cold rivulets. Zero hour five minutes away. A shave-tail watching the hands of his wrist watch. Out yonder was No Man's Land and barb wire entanglements and death.

An authoritative voice was speaking. "Men, we're due to go out there in about two minutes. Sergeant, see that every man has his gas mask and grenades. You'll fix bayonets. We go out under the barrage. There's a machine gun nest to the left. Corporal Galt, that's your objective. That nest must be wiped out. Take your squad. Got that?"

"Yes, sir." Frank Galt grinned in the darkness. He had given his .45 automatic to another man. The gun he had was the single-action Colt he had packed back in Montana. It was a good club in a tight. Frank tried

not to let on that he was scared as hell. He wouldn't let his lieutenant down. He liked Lieutenant Murphy, even if he was a second looie. Murphy had been a football star somewhere. He was a fightin' fool, to boot. Frank had seen Murphy shed his blouse one morning and whip hell out of a man that claimed to be the toughest guy in the outfit. That was Murphy's way. Millionaire, but regular as hell. Came from New York and had a dude ranch in Montana. One good guy.

"Good luck, Galt."

"Thanks, Lieutenant."

Then he was out there with his patrol. Crawling, playing possum when the star shells made the shell-torn darkness light as the fire from a blast furnace. Fighting through mud and barb wire while the big guns thundered and the machine guns chattered and dying men screamed.

Somewhere close to him Frank Galt heard a man groan as a German machine gun ripped the darkness and took its toll when a star shell burst.

"Powder River!" cried Frank Galt. A shell almost buried him. He went on, a crazy grin stamped on his torn and bleeding face, now black with mud. Blood and rain filled his eyes and mouth. A hand grenade was in his left hand, his single-action .45 in his right. He didn't know that he was alone, that his men were lying behind him, dead and dying in the shell crater. It didn't matter. There was that machine gun nest. Lieutenant Murphy was depending on him. No hands, no bugles, no voice to send him ahead—only the damned rattle of that machine gun, the blinding flares, and the roaring blackness that was in his ears, deafening him.

"Powder River. Let 'er buck!" And he was thumbing the hammer of his six-shooter. Two hand grenades had been hurled into the men who manned the machine gun. Then he was clubbing and fighting. Frank Galt, cowboy, had gone to war. . . .

FRANK GALT'S company commander and Lieutenant Murphy met in a Paris café. Silently they toasted the men who had gone overseas with them, but who would stay forever on French soil. They spoke of Corporal Frank Galt.

"His first time over the top," Lieutenant Murphy said thoughtfully, "and his last. Not enough left of him to make a decent funeral. I've sent his dog tags back, together with a letter telling how he died."

"His folks will have that to remember him by, anyway," the company commander put in. "Headquarters has okayed my recommendation. He'll get the Distinguished Service Cross for wiping out that machine gun nest."

The lieutenant smiled. "Only it's too bad he didn't have any folks. They're dead. I wonder who will get that stuff. . . ."

So it was that the dog tags bearing the number 770,617, together with citations and medals and a letter from Washington finally reached the Sheriff of Black Coulee. Pete La Fors was duly rewarded with Frank Galt's life insurance.

The Armistice was signed. The wild roses were once more in bloom along the banks of the Missouri River in the badlands of Montana. Pete La Fors, almost totally blind, would sit in the shade of the giant cottonwoods and listen to the scolding of the pet magpies that had once belonged to Frank Galt. And sometimes, when he had been hitting the jug, he would dust off his fiddle and play the *Red River Jig*. Tears would course down his weathered, seamed cheeks and into his white beard. And in the cabin, Frank Galt's saddle gathered dust.

CHAPTER TWO

AT A U. S. Army base hospital in Germany a kindly faced man in the uniform of a colonel of the Medical Corps was going over his reports with an assistant. Slowly his finger moved down a list of names, then stopped. "This man," he said, tapping the paper. "This Tom Jones. We'll have to give him special attention, make every effort to find out who he is. Physically he has recovered. But mentally . . . much remains to be done. You have done wonders on him, Doctor, since the Germans returned him to American hands. His face is scarcely blemished. His eyes see again. But . . ."

"But his memory?"

"Will return, I believe. A matter of months, even years, perhaps. But as the shock of war passes from his mind, he will remember. He will remember everything."

The assistant leaned over the colonel's desk to study the paper more closely. "Montana," he said. "He remembers that much about his past. Couldn't we . . .?"

The colonel shrugged his shoulders. "Out of the thousands of men who came from Montana? Improbable. All we can do is send him back there, and hope that some day this man who bears the name of Tom Jones will have his memory restored to him. In matters like this, medical science can do nothing but trust in the Lord's mercy. . . ."

And so it happened that a man with a scarred face, graying hair, with a blurred memory, came back home from the war—back to Montana. His name—bestowed by the Army—was Tom Jones.

Tom Jones worked in the mines at Butte and at the smelter at Great Falls. He drove a team, hauling dirt, and handled a Fresno scraper on an irrigation project. Finally one day, on Sun River, while he was working as a hay hand, he was told to wrangle the horses in the pasture. The feel of a horse between his legs reminded him of something he could not quite remember—something of that blurred past that the war had robbed him of. He bought a horse and a second-hand saddle and began drifting around the country, riding the grub line. He got a job wrangling horses for an outfit on the Rosebud. He saddled the wrong horse one morning before daylight and when the horse began pitching, Tom Jones put up a great ride. He tried other broncs and finally wound up in the fall riding the

rough string. He was handy with a rope and cow-savvy came natural to him.

"Where's your home range?" the wagon boss asked him one day.

Tom Jones grinned faintly and gave no reply. The next day he quit his job and rode away. He hated questions of any kind and because he now had a sort of impediment in his speech which made him grope for the words he wanted but only half remembered, he talked but little. Behind his back they called him "Dummy." They thought he was a little loco. Especially after they discovered the fact that he had a silver plate in his skull.

So Tom Jones became a drifting cowboy, groping his way from one cow outfit to the next. Always there was that curious look in his gray eyes. He learned to talk again by talking to his horse on those long, lonesome rides and in the winter line camps.

One night he drifted into a camp in the badlands. There were five men there. Because it was storming and there was a blizzard commencing, they let him stay. They were quiet men for the most part, talking little and then never saying anything very important. They needed shaving and hair trims and they all packed guns. They played poker and black jack and drank whiskey. Tom Jones did most of the cooking. For nearly a month they were snowbound at the camp.

One of them was a big, wide-shouldered man with gray hair and mustache. He seemed to be the boss. The others called him Grizzly. He had cold gray eyes and talked with a soft drawl.

There was one of the five who hated work of any kind and went by the name of Porky. Then there was a swarthy, quick-moving man a little under medium height who answered to the name of Dill. The other two were Mac and Yank. They were tall, rawboned, and looked like Missourians. They were cousins.

When the storm broke and the chinook wind melted the high drifts, Grizzly called Tom Jones outside.

"I reckon, Tom, that by now you're sort of onto us. We done talked 'er over. Taken a sort of straw vote. If you want to trail with us, you're plumb welcome. We travel the hoot-owl trail."

"How do you know you can trust me?"

"We're takin' a chance on you. Want to string your bets with ourn and take your chances?"

"Why not?" Tom shrugged his shoulders. "I ain't got a thing to lose but my hide."

Two weeks later the six of them held up a train in Wyoming. There was a little shooting. Nobody was badly hurt but the sound of gunfire seemed to stun Tom Jones. The blood left his face and Grizzly almost had to drag him to get him on his horse. For several days, there at the hidden camp they had used as a hideaway, Tom Jones sat around, a queer look in his eyes. He wouldn't eat and hardly slept at all. After the loot was divided Grizzly told Tom Jones they

wouldn't be able to use him any more. They thought he was yellow.

"I don't think, Jones," said the big outlaw leader, "that you belong on the hoot-owl trail. No hard feelin's, understand. We'll split up like friends. Good luck."

"The same to you, boys."

So Tom Jones drifted on aimlessly. But winter jobs were scarce and he kept riding the grub line. He drifted into a town in Colorado one day. Tacked to the wall in the post office was a reward notice that described Grizzly and Porky and Dill and Mac and Yank. They were wanted for highway robbery, cattle rustling and murder. There was also a fairly accurate description of a John Doe. The description fitted Tom Jones. The money in his pocket, his cut from the train robbery, was too risky to attempt to pass; so Tom Jones, with more than a thousand dollars in the pocket of his blanket-lined overalls, was worse than broke. He headed back for Montana. And for some fool reason he kept that dangerous money. He still had it in his warsack the following spring when he hired out to a horse outfit in the Montana badlands.

The big cottonwoods, the taste of wild currants and gooseberries, the smell of wild roses and sagebrush and greasewood, all reminded him of something he could not name. Of something that belonged to his past.

Then came a raging lightning storm. Chain lightning and the crash of thunder. And Tom Jones was found cowering in the lee of a cutbank, his bloodless face hidden in his arms, shivering like a frightened child. And when the storm was over, Tom Jones, silent, still unnerved, saddled his private horse and threw his tarp-covered bed on his pack horse and rode away without collecting the money due him. And in his eyes there was mirrored the hell of the war that had smashed him in its iron grip.

FATE plays queer pranks sometimes. In the office of Sheriff Steele at Black Coulee, Montana, were framed the dog tags, the medal for valor, the citation for exceptional bravery under fire, all belonging to Frank Galt. And within ten feet of them, on the same wall, was a reward notice describing Tom Jones.

The sheriff stayed overnight with Pete La Fors down on the river. They talked until late, the law officer and the old 'breed who was going blind.

"By gar, me, I'm have de dream 'bout Frankie. He h'aint dead. He's come back to h'ol Pete. He's say to me, 'Pete, here's dat Frankie come back. Mak de dance. Smoke de pipe. H'eat de beef. Drink planty whiskey, by gar. Because Frankie he's come home to stay.' He's come to h'ol Pete La Fors h'in dat dream. He's talk lak Frankie, h'all right, but he don' look lak Frankie. De face is change'. But you mus' h'onderstan' 'bout how h'ol Pete he don' see so good no more."

They drank from the jug and Pete dusted off his fiddle and played. A quarter-breed girl, a niece of Pete's, did the cooking and took care of the cabin. Her name was Rose and she was the best dancer and the best-

looking girl along the river. She had dark eyes and an olive skin and very white teeth that showed when her red lips smiled. She liked to laugh and look at herself in Pete's cracked old mirror. She made friends with the magpies and deer and the family of skunks that lived under the cabin.

Now she waited on the sheriff and old Pete and lighted Pete's pipe for him and danced to the tune of the fiddle. She helped Pete beat the sheriff playing checkers. And when they sat around eating popcorn and apples, she listened to the men talk.

Sheriff Steele grinned at the pine board floor, which was scrubbed until it showed white. There was no dust in the corners, and the pots and skillets were brightly scoured. A red-checked table cloth and bright-colored curtains made the place homey and warm. Hot coffee and pie made of dried apples tickled the sheriff's palate.

"You'll make some lucky feller a good wife," said Sheriff Steele. "Yep. You got what it takes to make even a wild cowboy quit a-roamin' an' think of settlin' down."

Rose La Fors laughed a little but her dark eyes were sad. "For me, Sheriff, there could be only one man for a husband. Because he is dead, I will die an old maid."

"But Pete says Frank Galt ain't dead."

"Sometimes at night, when I pray hard, I think that Frank will come back some day. Because, you understand, I did not see him dead; so it is hard to believe that he died. I pray sometimes to God, sometimes to the Manitou, to send Frank back to us."

Rose's smile broke through the wistfulness on her face, though her dark eyes were misted with unshed tears. "You see, a 'breed has two gods to ask for help. The white man's God and the Indian's Great Manitou."

"Don't seem like you could lose then, Rose. Now old Pete's dreams might be whiskey dreams. But yours would be different. I wouldn't give a plugged dime for all Pete's dreams. That moonshine he makes . . ."

This brought on an argument that lasted probably half an hour and ended with a toddy and the *Red River Jig* on the fiddle.

"Ary strangers crossed the river, Pete?" asked the sheriff.

"Not that I seen."

"And if you did see a hoot-owl cowboy you'd never tell the law about it."

Men like Sheriff Steele never let on to Pete La Fors that they knew he was going blind. And Pete, during the months when he was losing his eyesight; had been preparing for that day when total darkness would come. So skillful had he become in concealing his affliction that a stranger would never suspect that Pete La Fors was almost blind. Tiny sounds told their messages to Pete. He could tell when a chinook was coming or when the ice would break up in the river. He could place any man's name by the sound of his voice. The whisper of the wind, the muttering of the river, the far-away rumble of thunder, all talked to Pete La Fors, telling him their stories. So that ap-

proach of eternal darkness only seemed to make the white-haired old man more understanding, more kind. The slap of a beaver tail, the distant howl of a wolf, they were things that he heard and understood. And there was the odor of spring or the late autumn when the cottonwoods dropped their leaves. Nature, with its sounds and smells, talked to this old man who had been father and mother to Frank Galt.

"By gar, some day, Frankie he's come back to h'ol Pete."

THE sheriff left early in the morning. "Grizzly Gallagher and his gang are somewhere in this part of the country," he said as he stepped out the doorway. "They stuck up a bank and killed two men. There's a new feller trailin' with 'em. Kind of a loco cuss, from what I hear. Loco as hell. Goes under the name of Tom Jones. I wouldn't be askin' you for information, Pete, but that bunch is bad medicine. Shot a woman and a bank clerk that had his hands in the air. I know better than to ask you about fellers like Kid Curry and Butch Cassidy or any of the Wild Bunch or Long Henry's gang. But this Grizzly Gallagher outfit needs killin'. If they show up here, any of 'em, take care that you got a sawed-off shotgun handy and that Rose is hid somewheres where them snakes can't find her."

"Me, I'm know dat Grizzly h'an de gang. All but dat Tom Jones. He's new one h'on me."

"He's got a face that's scarred and there's a snow-white streak of hair across his head," the sheriff said, "and a silver plate in his skull. He has a funny way of talkin'; he don't stutter but he kind of talks like he had to think out his words. He's a bronc rider and a good 'un, they claim. But loco as hell when there's shootin' or in a lightnin' storm. Never does much talkin'. He might show up here. The Grizzly Gallagher gang is all scattered now. So watch out for 'em. Well, so long, Pete. So long, Rose. Don't let that old rascal do anything reckless when spring gits here and his blood gits circulatin'. He might take a notion to swim the river or go bear huntin' or somethin'. If any of that gang shows up, git word to me, Pete. And keep on dreamin' about Frank Galt. I'd give plenty to believe them dreams was comin' true. And when you're tellin' your prayers to the Big Boss and the Manitou, Rose, put in one for me. Me, I don't savvy prayer talk."

So Rose prayed and old Pete La Fors dreamed. And back in the badlands a man called Tom Jones made a lonely camp and covered his face with shaking hands when the thunder storms tore loose. . . .

Tom Jones ran out of meat. He roped a yearling and butchered it, cutting the brand out of the hide and getting rid of the earmarks. That Half Circle G brand and the swallow-fork and underbit earmarks reminded him of something. He knew that back there in the past he had known that brand.

He had no axe to quarter the beef

but did as best he could with a butcher knife. He was getting low on salt and beans and flour, and the reward notices he had seen posted made him wary about going into any town to buy grub. The next best thing was to steal what he needed from some ranch or camp, leaving money to pay for it. But he was short of money now, except for that stolen currency, so he decided to swap a couple of quarters of beef for what grub he needed.

From his camp he had spotted a ranch down in the cottonwoods, a small-sized outfit in the bottom land along the river. He decided to take the risk of this grub-swapping when he saw someone ride away from the ranch one evening about sundown. After the rider had left the ranch, headed towards the Rocky Point crossing where there was a post office and store, Tom Jones slipped down to the small ranch under the cover of darkness. Across his saddle were two quarters of beef.

He made a careful survey of the seemingly deserted place. Then he left the beef hanging in the barn and went on foot to the house. It was a four-roomed log cabin. There was something familiar about the place; he seemed to know the location of things. It was as if he had, back in that shadowed past, known this ranch.

No light showed in the house. Pete La Fors had no need of a light in the world of blurred shadows. Rose had gone to Rocky Point for the mail and would not be back until late. The night was mild, so the old halfbreed sat outside by the river bank listening to the river, to the slap of beaver tails, the boom of a horned owl. The smaller noises of the night. After a time he dozed off.

CHAPTER THREE

He woke with a start. Someone was moving in the house. Someone who wore boots and was moving around as quietly as possible. That would not be Rose because she wore moccasins and always sang or whistled when she came home. In the darkness, old Pete La Fors sat listening. There was something wrong about that visitor who came after dark and tried to move so quietly. Pete wished he had his sawed-off shotgun. Men who stopped at the ranch of Pete La Fors had no need to use caution unless they were there for no good purpose. Pete heard the scrape of a match inside, and the faint noise of the lamp chimney being lifted and the lamp lighted. Pete La Fors, outside in the darkness, waited.

Sounds of cupboards being opened, stealthy sounds came to him, telling him that no honest man was inside there.

This was the house of Pete La Fors whose doors had no locks, whose food and shelter belonged to all men. Slow to anger was old Pete La Fors. But now his blood stirred faster. His voice, when he called out, was harsh with anger.

"Come h'out of my house, you damn sneak thief. Come h'out here and act lak de man, by gar."

Silence was his answer, save for the quick breathing of the intruder. Then the man called Tom Jones walked out of the house and stood just outside the doorway.

"Here I am. I didn't think anybody was home. I needed some salt and flour and a handful of beans. There're two quarters of beef hanging in your meat house to pay for this grub I stole."

"No man has de need to steal my grub. Many men stop here. Pete La Fors never take de pay for grub. I bet you steal dat beef you leave here, eh?"

"Yes. I had no meat. I killed a yearlin'."

"About de brand?"

"I cut it up and threw the pieces in the river. The ears went with it."

"What was dat brand?"

"A Half Circle G. The left ear was marked with a swallowfork. The right had an underbit."

"And so, by gar, you steal de beef from a dead man and de salt from a blind man. You mus' be damn strong feller. You mus' be brave like hell, eh? Yep, de damn strong man, by gar. Take dat beef away. Take along dat grub you steal from a blind man."

"I don't savvy what you're gettin' at, mister. I was hungry and I stole what I needed. When I git the money, I'll pay you what I owe you. And I'll give you the money for that yearlin' I butchered. I don't rob the dead or the blind. If you got work for me to do, I'll work out my debt."

"Mebbyso, by gar, I'm call dat bet. What you call your name?"

"I—I ain't got a name, mister."

"Dat's h'all right por me," returned the old halfbreed. "Lots of fellers he'll stop here with no names. Now mak' de tea h'an cook de grub h'an get the wrinkles h'out of de belly. De jug, she's h'on de shelf by de flour bin. She's damn good whiskey I'm make myself. Pete La Fors mak de bes' damn whiskey h'in Montana."

"Pete La Fors?" the man called Tom Jones repeated.

"You know de name, eh?"

"Yes. Yes, I know the name. Just like I know that Half Circle G brand. . . ."

Now he heard the sound of a horse coming up the trail, and out of the faint moonlight the song of a girl.

"I reckon, mister," said Tom Jones, "I better be goin'. I didn't know you was expectin' womenfolks."

Pete La Fors chuckled. "Mak' de tea, cook de grub. Jus' one woman. She's de niece por me. Her name Rose La Fors."

And when Rose rode up, while Tom Jones was cooking supper inside, Pete whispered to her, "Get me de shotgun. Dat feller h'inside, he's mak queer talk. I'm bet he's dat Tom Jones de sheriff talk about. You look h'at de face h'an see 'bout de scars. Look h'at de hair 'bout dat white streak. Dat feller he's bad medicine."

TOM JONES looked into the twin barrels of a sawed-off shotgun and grinned crookedly.

"You win, mister. But you don't need to cover me with that scattergun. And the lady can ease down the

hammer of that .45 she's holdin'. I'll work for the grub I took and for that beef I stole from the dead feller that owns the Half Circle G iron."

"Your name is Tom Jones?" asked Rose, her dark eyes narrowed.

"That's as good a name as the next."

"One of the Grizzly Gallagher gang?" she went on.

Her face was tense, a shade pale in the kitchen lamplight. Ignoring the threat of the two guns, Tom Jones rolled a cigarette.

"The sheriff," Rose said in a tone she tried to make firm, "will be here in the morning. We're turning you over to him."

Tom Jones nodded. He kept looking at the blind Pete and this girl who wore a flannel shirt and overalls and beaded moccasins. And she kept staring at him. Tom Jones lighted his cigarette, then laid his six-shooter on the kitchen table beside the lamp.

"Ain't I supposed to be handcuffed or shot or somethin'?"

"Tell me, Rose, if he mak' de bad moove," old Pete said. "I'll pull bot' triggers."

Tom Jones grinned at the girl. She reddened faintly under his steady gaze. "I robbed a dead man," he said slowly. "I robbed a blind man. Now I reckon you think I'll insult a woman. Is that it?"

"What about the bank clerk who was shot?" asked Rose sharply. "And the woman who was shot, too?"

"I reckon you know what you're talkin' about, ma'am. Me, I don't quite savvy. Back at my camp is some money that was stole in a train holdup. If you folks want it, take it. But I never killed ary bank man and I sure didn't harm any woman. Do I look like that kind of a man? If I do, turn loose with them guns. I ain't got a thing to lose—not even a name."

The hardness had gone out of his eyes and his voice was less halting. Rose lowered the hammer of her gun. Pete La Fors stood there, head cocked a little sideways, as if he were listening.

"Long tam, m'sieu, h'ol' Pete La Fors he's not got de h'eyes por to see. But h'all de tam he's listen. De bird, de h'animal, he's h'all talk to h'ol' Pete. When de night he's come to a man's eyes, he's sit h'in de dark h'an listen. He's know de wolf from de dog dat wags de tail. He's know 'bout de good from de bad, jus' from de soun'. Rose, mak' de tea. Mak' de grub. Dis feller, he h'ain' de wolf. He's frien', by gar. Somewhere I'm know dat voice, long tam ago, before h'ol' Pete lose de daylight h'in de h'eyes. Mak' de drink from de jug, Tom Jones. Rose, mak' de tea h'an de grub. Before daylight, Tom Jones he'll ride de trail. When Sheriff Steele stop by, h'ol Pete h'an Rose dey h'ain' see no stranger dat look lak Tom Jones."

Pete La Fors lowered his shotgun. Rose put the .45 back on the shelf, then turned to the stove. Tom Jones made no move to pick up his six-shooter. The two men sat there at the table with their tin cups half filled with Pete's whiskey. Rose warmed food and made black tea.

"The name of that dead feller that owned the Half Circle G brand?" asked Tom Jones. "What was his name?"

It was Rose La Fors who gave the quick reply. "Frank Galt. He lived across the river. He was killed in the war."

"Frank Galt. . . . He was killed in the war. Corporal Frank Galt. . . ." The words came haltingly from the lips of Tom Jones.

"Mother in Heaven!" cried Rose. "You knew Frank Galt?"

"I don't know. I don't remember. But there was a Corporal Frank Galt. Mebbyso I knew him."

"You were in the war?"

"Yes—Germany."

"The Army?" Her eyes sought his.

"Yes. I was in a German hospital first. They spoke German there and I learned it. Like I learned French from the other doctor. After that I learned English. The first word I spoke was 'Montana.' So they sent me to Montana to try and pick up a lost trail. But there was a Frank Galt somewhere in that war."

Rose was crying a little. She touched old Pete's shoulder. He could feel her hand tremble. "The sheriff will be here in the morning, Uncle Pete," she said. "He must not find Tom Jones. He knew Frank Galt in the war. Maybe he saw Frank die."

"No," smiled Pete La Fors, shaking his white head. "Frankie, he h'ain' dead. I'm have de dream too many tam 'bout Frankie. Rose, de rivaire she's purty damn high, eh?"

"Too high to cross," said Rose. "You mean to Frank's ranch? You mean the sheriff wouldn't think of crossing the river to look for Tom Jones there?"

"*Oui*," chuckled the blind man. "By gar, my frien, me, Pete La Fors, he'll take de skiff h'an row you across dat rivaire."

"Uncle Pete! Even a strong man with two eyes couldn't put a skiff across!"

Pete La Fors reached for the jug. "By gar, Pete La Fors he's know how to talk to that h'ol' rivaire. We'll put dat skiff across after we drink de tea."

BUT PETE LA FORS did not take the skiff across the river that night. The tea kettle had just come to a boil when Pete's sensitive ears caught the sound of someone coming on horseback.

"De sheriff, by gar."

Tom Jones was outside after a quick handshake and a promise to return. Rose followed him to the barn, where he had left his horse. For a moment they stood close together, in the shadow of the cottonwoods. Tom Jones, following some long-forgotten impulse, took her suddenly in his arms. His lips clung to hers. Then he was on his horse. Before him was the river, bank full, lapping at the clay banks and sandbars with its treacherous undercurrents and whirlpools. Rose saw him spur his horse into the water. Then the darkness over the muddy river hid the horse and rider. And Rose La Fors, breathing fast through lips that still burned

from that hard, quick kiss, prayed for the life of the man who had aroused in her a strange feeling such as she had never felt for any man save Frank Galt.

Tom Jones slid from the saddle and clung to the tail of his horse. The animal was a good water horse and was wise enough not to fight the swift current. As for the man, the feel of that river put no fear in him. Rather, it gave him a strange feeling of happiness. He understood that river. He knew the tug of its twisting currents. And he knew that this was not the first time he and a horse had crossed the stream. This was his river. It belonged to him. It was part of the past that he could not remember.

He did not know that he had crossed this river, even before he could really swim without the aid of a log or a big piece of driftwood. He had crossed many a head of cattle here. He had swum the river here when it was higher than this, even when big chunks of ice were coming down on the swollen current. Born and raised on the river, it belonged to him. He belonged to it. He felt like yelling out of sheer exuberance. He wanted to laugh and yell and sing.

A treacherous undercurrent caught him and the horse, pulling them below the surface. The horse came up, lunging, fighting the water. The man's voice quieted the animal and he slapped the horse's neck with his hat as he hung to the saddle strings. He had jerked the bridle off and fastened it to the saddle horn.

"Steady, pony. This river ain't hurtin' you. Don't git panicky, old-timer. . . . That's better. Drift downstream. There's a long sandbar below. Good place to land. Even in high water that bar sticks out halfway acrost the river. Take 'er easy, pony. . . ."

Talking to a horse, grinning, his words coming easy, remembering a forgotten sandbar and the ways of the river. Remembering and not knowing he was doing so. And he was laughing and sobbing brokenly when he and the horse landed on the far side of the river, on the sandbar that showed like drifted snow in the moonlight. Swiftly he rode across the wide strip of sand, following a deer trail through the willows; then across the bottom land through the cottonwoods to a log barn and a corral and a cabin.

He unsaddled the horse and hobbled him. There was wild hay growing almost hock high but no sign of life at the little ranch. His matches had gotten wet in crossing the river. His clothes were soggy, dripping, and he was a little chilled. He groped around the dark interior of the cabin for quite a while until finally he found some matches in a covered coffee can. There were candles and grub on the shelves.

He built a fire and made a pot of coffee. He found some dry clothes that were old and dust covered, and changed into them, drying the clothes he had wet in crossing the river. He kept thinking of old Pete La Fors and the girl called Rose. Had they been part of that forgotten past? And what

had he been to that dead man named Frank Galt? Who was Frank Galt, anyhow? Why had he called him Corporal Frank Galt?

What was hidden, back there in the No Man's Land the German stretcher bearers had taken him from, a battered, smashed, unidentified man whose uniform had been torn from him, whose smashed body, lacking identification, had been dumped in a burial trench? Only at the last moment had he been salvaged by a French doctor, a prisoner, who recognized a sign of life, there among the dead, and had taken from that death pit the wreckage of a human being who had barely missed being buried alive with the torn corpses of other men who had been gun fodder. War at its worst, at its most critical time, could spare no minutes in identifying broken bodies. They were put into a long trench. The shell-torn soil of the battlefield was shoveled over them. So they died and were buried. So the blood-soaked soil of war was the last haven for missing men.

But the man called Tom Jones had been taken from that shell-ripped trench. For months his face had been swathed in bandages, his eyesight gone. He had known the sort of darkness that Pete La Fors now knew. He had been blind, then given back his eyesight by the skilled hands of two great surgeons, the Frenchman, and later the American Army surgeon. Those two men had brought him back from the dead, had spared neither time nor effort to give life to the broken shell of a human being. Each of those men had done their utmost, and their efforts had been successful. Tom Jones told himself, as he smoked a soggy cigarette, that he must write back to those two great surgeons..... Some day—but not yet. Not until he had picked up the broken thread that would bring back his past.

CHAPTER FOUR

ON THE other side of the river, Sheriff Steele of Black Coulee put up his horse. Rose made a pot of coffee. Sheriff Steele never drank tea. She made some biscuits and threw away the burned ones she had cooked for Tom Jones, then left in the oven too long. She moved about the cabin in her moccasined feet. She hummed softly. Her dark eyes were shining, and now and then her lips would smile faintly. She cut a thick steak and put it in the hot skillet. And she filled Pete's pipe and lit it for him.

Sheriff Steele came from the barn. Rose had his drink ready. His late supper was cooking. He seemed more silent than usual.

"Ain't seen any strangers, Pete?"

"No strangers," put in Rose.

"No strangers," added Pete La Fors.

"I come on a camp back in the badlands. There was some fresh meat there. There was a bed and pack outfit. And in a warsack I found this." He unwrapped a piece of worn canvas and dumped a stack of currency on the table.

"This is from a train holdup down

in Wyoming. The serial numbers match. The Grizzly Gallagher gang pulled that robbery. I damn near ketched the feller, Pete. His fire was still warm. His tracks started in this direction. But night come on and I couldn't foller the sign. Like I said before, Pete, I wouldn't ask you about any of the Wild Bunch or the Long Henry gang. They're outlaws, but there ain't a snake among 'em. But this Grizzly Gallagher outfit is a bunch of wolves."

"Better drink the coffee before it gets too cold," said Rose. "And your steak is ready."

The grizzled sheriff sipped his coffee. Rose got out the checkerboard and checkers. Pete La Fors puffed his pipe.

Rose had forgotten to put sugar on the table. The sheriff got up and opened the cupboard where the sugar bowl was kept. Alongside the sugar bowl was a six-shooter with home-made wooden grips cut from cedar, whittled out with a jackknife. The old sheriff picked up the gun. His hand was none too steady. He looked at it, then at the blind Pete La Fors. Rose had gone into the next room with the checkerboard and a lamp.

"Whatever become of the six-shooter that belonged to Frank Galt, Pete?"

"Dat one I'm fix for him when dat handle she gets broke?"

"Yeah. You whittled out a handle for it. I was here at the time, inspectin' cattle. Helped you put wooden grips on the gun."

"By gar, dat's right. Frankie had dat gun when you put him in dat jail."

"He never gave it back to you, Pete?"

"Frankie he take dat gun to de war. Hell, he's write back how he's goin' to use dat gun to shoot de h'ears h'off dat Kaiser."

Sheriff Steele put the six-shooter back in the cupboard. Then he walked to the open doorway and stared through squinted eyes across the river, stared at the faint light in the windows of Frank Galt's cabin.

Less than twelve hours ago he had eaten at Pete's house. There had been no fresh beef. Now there was fresh meat on the table and two quarters of a yearling hung up in the shed. There was fresh horse sign near the barn. There was Frank Galt's six-shooter in the cupboard. For the first time in many months a light showed in the cabin across the river.

"Dreamed any lately about Frank Galt, Pete?"

"Frank, he'll come back some tam, by gar."

Sheriff Steele pocketed the pile of currency on the table and finished his coffee. He walked into the next room with Pete La Fors. Pete was talking.

At the window stood Rose. Her face was white. She was gripping the checkerboard so tightly that the bones of her knuckles showed white through the olive skin of her hands. She was staring with a strange look in her unwinking eyes into the night. Staring out across the river where a light showed in the cabin that belonged to Frank Galt.

THE SNOWDRIFTS were breaking up in the mountains, sending down melted snow and ice into every tributary of the muddy Missouri. A late spring after a white winter was filling the river banks to overflowing. Trees, haystacks, frame buildings, logs, all manner of things, drifted downstream in a yellowish-brown current that flooded the bottom lands and swirled, muttering like some angry, animate thing as it carried destruction with its relentless overflow. Dead cattle and horses and sheep and hogs, drifting, hung up on sandbars and islands to rot. No living thing, man or beast, could cross the Missouri the morning after Tom Jones crossed it and dried his clothes in Frank Galt's cabin on the far side.

A dozen big tributaries had, within a few hours time, poured their water into the swollen river. Ranchers were moving back onto higher land, back in the badlands. Tex's place at Rocky Point Crossing was under five feet of water. The ferry couldn't get across because big snags had fouled the cable. Tex salvaged a barrel or two of whiskey and his mule and dog; a sack of flour, some canned stuff, and some tobacco. White-whiskered, heavy of build, old Tex Alvord sat smoking his pipe while he camped on one of the adobe buttes beyond the water line. He had butchered somebody's yearling and was eating a noon breakfast of bannock bread and beef and coffee and a can of tomatoes, sharing it with the hound dog. Now and then he'd take a swallow of whiskey.

He could see across the river. He had marked a tall cottonwood back of the bottom land and sent word to Pete La Fors by a boy that he'd bet Pete a gallon of whiskey that the water would be higher than it was back in 1907. Pete's place was up the river a few miles and on the other side. Every spring when the high water came, these two old friendly enemies would bet on the high flood mark. Out of sheer bravado and orneriness Tex had predicted his measurement by making a notch on a big cottonwood. Then he had moved his stuff back on the clay butte among the scrub pines and sat with his dog and mule and jug and tobacco, a smile on his white-bearded lips.

He was squatted there by his fire, a tin cup of whiskey in his hand, the hound dog asleep beside him, when he sighted a man on horseback on the far side of the river.

"Hallooooooo, Tex! Halloo!"

Tex let him holler for nearly ten minutes. He knew the voice of Sheriff Steele of Black Coulee. They were friends, to be sure. They had come up the trail together from Texas years ago. But old Tex didn't like sheriffs' badges, and Steele was a sheriff.

"Git your head out from under you, you ornery old coot, and fetch that ferry acrost! Quit hidin', you damned ol' Texican whiskey-peddlin', beef-stealin' renegade! Damn it, I got to git acrost this river!"

Old Tex set down his cup of whiskey and spat a stream of tobacco juice into the fire.

He made a megaphone out of his

hands. The old hound dog, stone deaf and almost blind, growled in his sleep, dreaming of past chases after wolves and lions and coyotes. It was a wheezy, rheumatic growl. Tex looked at the old hound.

"Watch fer strangers, Settin' Bull. Eat 'em up into small hunks. Stand guard till hell's a snowbank."

The sleeping old hound's legs twitched in his dreaming. His tail pounded the ground. Tex's eyes, as unblemished and blue as they were the day, fifty years ago, when he had come up the trail, were the eyes of a man silently chuckling. Then he cupped his hands to make a megaphone and called across the river to the impatient law officer.

"Who's makin' all that racket?"

"Me. Steele. Ed Steele. Are you drunk?"

"How's that? Can't hear plain. Did you say *something about a hunk?* You mean meat? Hell, I ain't et no beef meat in months."

"Drunk! Drunk, you damned old billy-goat-whiskered fool! Sober up and fetch acrost the ferry."

"Fetch acrost Harry? Harry who?"

"Damn your ornery hide. I never asked about no Harry. *Ferry! Ferry!* Fetch it acrost!"

Tex spat another stream of tobacco juice. "Ain't no feller named Harry over here. If there was, I wouldn't fetch him acrost. That damned old thievin', cheatin' feller at the Chinook Mercantile sent me a second-hand cable and pulley blocks that ain't worth the price of a drink of Pete La Fors's Injun whiskey. Snags fouled 'er last night. Old Settin' Bull ketched lumbago again, on top of that. I'm out of horse liniment. Can't doctor him with nothin' but whiskey. Now, there ain't no feller named Harry here. Harry who? Only Harry I know is makin' horsehair bridles at the pen at Deer Lodge. A near-sighted old idiot that calls hisse'f the sheriff of Black Coulee claimed Harry was ridin' a horse that wore the wrong brand. He gits Harry ten years at Deer Lodge. Now if Harry was to be here, he might he'p me mend that damned cable. It busted along about midnight. Sounded like a cannon poppin'. I takes Settin' Bull an' saddles up Lightnin' an' takes to the hills with—"

"Dry up and fetch over that ferry, you whiskey-guzzlin' ol' river rat," the sheriff roared.

"Who in hell are you?"

"Sheriff Steele. Ed Steele! I got to git acrost the river!"

"Ed Steele! Why in hell didn't you say so in the first place? What in hell you bellerin' about?"

"I'm after some outlaws. I got to git acrost the river."

"Wade 'er, Ed. Wade 'er. She's only hock deep in the deepest part."

Sheriff Steele cussed. He cussed old Tex and the river and things in general. Then he reined his horse around and started to ride off. Tex's voice followed him.

"If you drop by Pete La Fors' place, Ed, tell the old son that he owes me a gallon. River's up past the notch I chopped six inches above the 1907 highwater mark."

WHEN Sheriff Steele had ridden away, old Tex put a fresh stick or two of wood on the campfire and loaded his corncob pipe. The old white mule called Lightning nibbled at the tufts of buffalo grass with teeth that were cupped with age and yellow and almost useless. Sitting Bull dreamed on, twitching, whimpering, pounding his tail. Tex kept on smoking, blue eyes gazing into the distance. Nor did he move a muscle or change expression when Tom Jones rode up. The white mule named Lightning looked Tom and his horse over with an eye that registered neither friendliness nor enmity. Sitting Bull dreamed on. Tex's blue eyes watched the river.

"Light and set, mister," he said, without looking away from the river. "I reckon you heard that damned sheriff givin' up head on the far side of the river. He's bawlin' on the trail of some poor feller that done somethin' the law didn't like. I reckon you're the man he's after. Rest your saddle. Tie into the grub. That dawg might act meaner'n hell but he won't go at a man's throat until I tell him to."

Tom Jones stepped down off his horse and loosened the saddle cinch. He grinned at the sleeping old hound, at the white-bearded, white-haired old man who had not even troubled to look up at him.

"I sighted lights at the Frank Galt place last night," drawled old Tex, still not looking at his visitor. "I sighted a feller ridin' away from there an hour or two ago. I reckon you're him. He'p yourse'f to the whiskey and grub. Then, if you're one of that damned Grizzly Gallagher outfit, and I reckon you must be, ride on. I'd feed even a hydrophobia wolf. And I reckon that's about the kind of man you are."

The grin was wiped from the face of Tom Jones now. He jerked his latigo tight and stepped back into the saddle.

"I don't drink with a man or eat the grub belongin' to a man that thinks I'm a snake," Tom Jones said. "If you was forty years younger and forty times bigger than me, I'd give you a gun in each hand and still be able to prove you a liar. They call me Tom Jones. I crossed the river last night. Crossed over to this side. I stayed at the place they call a dead man's place. It belonged to some man named Galt. Frank Galt. Somewhere, once, I knew you, old man. Sure, I was one of that Grizzly Gallagher gang. But I didn't leave snake tracks behind me. I got nothing to be ashamed about."

Old Tex had gotten to his feet. There was a six-shooter in his hand. The smile was gone from his eyes, leaving them cold and hard and puckered into slits.

"I don't need to be forty years younger. I kin handle a gun with you or any man. Fill your hand with a gun, you young whelp!"

Tom Jones stepped down from his horse. He stood there facing the older man. Tex, bowlegged, white-bearded, with uncut white hair under a battered hat, glared at him. Tom Jones

smiled faintly, making no move to draw his gun.

"You got to believe me, mister," he said, measuring his words. "I ain't a snake."

"Fill your hand, I said!"

Neither man had taken notice of the sleeping hound. Not until the old dog, deaf as a rock, almost blind, but with nostrils twitching, got laboriously to his feet. There was a deep, husky whimper in his throat. On legs no longer steady, the old hound, guided by his nose, tottered towards Tom Jones. There was a choked, almost human sobbing whine in the dog's throat. And Tom Jones, dropping to his knees, was holding the old hound in his arms. The dog, whimpering, whining, licked his face and hands. Tom Jones, his eyes filling with tears, a hard lump in his throat, held the old dog, trying to talk, trying to say words he did not remember.

Slowly, very slowly, old Tex shoved his old six-shooter back in the waistband of his overalls. He stared through squinted eyes at the man and dog. A man who now was sobbing brokenly. A dog that whimpered, tail pounding its mute signal of joy.

"Sitting Bull," Tom Jones kept whispering in a voice that was a husky whisper. "Sitting Bull. . ."

Old Tex kept trying to light his pipe. He didn't know that he was pulling the head of a burnt match across the leg of his overalls. He didn't know he was trying to light his pipe. He couldn't take his gaze from the scarred-faced man who held a whimpering old hound in his arms while the dog's long tongue washed away the scalding tears that coursed down the tanned cheeks of the man called Tom Jones.

It might have been seconds or minutes or hours that passed. Then old Tex spoke: "I taken as good care as I could of Settin' Bull while you was away, Frank Galt."

THAT was the way Tom Jones became, because of a dog, a hound he had raised when he was a boy, Frank Galt. Frank Galt had come back into his own. But the coming was not easy, because he had no one to talk to him, to make him remember things, except old Tex and the hound dog he had raised from a pup.

It was old Tex who helped bring back memories to the befogged brain of Frank Galt.

"This damn cable gits fouled on me, Frank. That's how come the ferry won't run."

Warming up the cold coffee, cooking stolen beef, trying to keep his pipe lit, trying to keep his voice steady, old Tex talked as he fussed around the fire.

"You're Tex Alvord."

A grin spread across old Tex's bearded mouth. "You guessed the name right, son."

"And me, I'm Frank Galt?"

"Yep." Tex struck another match to light his pipe. Ordinarily Tex would have used a coal from the fire to light his pipe. But his brain was too muddled, too confused, right now. He kept on talking.

"Got to git that cable an' them

damned pulley blocks untangled. See, there was a hell of a big cottonwood snag come along. There was a dead cow tangled up in the tree. And a lot of hay from a haystack. And I was drawin' me off a gallon at the time. There was Settin' Bull on the ferry, gone sound asleep. Deefer than a rock. And this Lightnin' mule down in the lower pasture. And no oil in the lantern and me plumb alone on a pair of laigs bowed up with rheumatism. There was Settin' Bull to save. There was Lightnin' to ketch an' saddle up. There was a barrel of whiskey that was fit fer real customers. The damned ranch goin' down the river in the light of the moon. The current a-poundin' hell outa things. My ferry hawgtied out there an' Settin' Bull aboard, sleepin' like hell through 'er all. So I—"

"Want that block and tackle and cable fixed, Tex?"

Tex tried to keep from yelling. He knew, better than any man in the world, that Frank Galt, even when he was a kid, savvied all there was to know about a ferry and its equipment. Frank Galt was remembering. Old Tex took another chew of tobacco, although there was a fresh one already bulging his cheek. He tried his best to hold his voice steady. Sitting Bull was wagging his bony tail and licking Frank's hand. The two men looked at one another.

"I'd be proud to have you lend me a hand with that mud scow, Frank."

Frank Galt's voice was a little halting. "*Maverick* ain't a mud scow, Tex. She's the best boat that ever swam across the Missouri River."

So Frank Galt, who had helped build that old ferry boat, was remembering. Remembering the name of the ferry that was the pride of Tex's heart. Frank Galt grinned. Old Tex grinned back. So began the first memory lesson for the man whom the law called Tom Jones.

It took the better part of twenty-four hours to repair the blocks and cable on the ferry. Frank Galt did all the hard work. Now and then he would whistle or hum. The river went down fourteen inches. But it would still be a dangerous job to attempt a ferry crossing. Too many big snags were drifting down and the cable was weak in spots. Getting back and forth to the ferry mooring was no easy task. Mud and water were waist deep. Frank Galt worked all day in wet clothing, plowing through the mud, skinning his hands and ruining his boots. But he kept whistling and humming while Tex whittled and chawed and talked to the deaf Sitting Bull. The second evening Frank returned to the camp in the badlands, there was a grin on his face.

"The *Maverick* is sea-goin' now, Tex. I took her across and brought her back."

"I watched you, son. You always was a river man, since you was knee high to a hoptoad. Handy at swimmin' and handlin' a skiff. And you taken to this ferry just like a fish takes to water. Remember the catfish we used to ketch on the trot lines? And the times you helped me git the *Maverick* into the water when the ice

melted? Mind the time the cable busted?"

"And it took a week to get the ferry off the sandbar? I'll tell a man I remember, Tex."

"It'll all come back in time. Don't try to think 'er all out at once."

"Most of it's a blank," said Frank. "I feel like a man in a nightmare. Can't wake up. It's—"

"It's hell, son, but it'll all come back in time. Meanwhile we got to be careful. To the law folks you're Tom Jones of the Grizzly Gallagher gang. There's a fancy price on your hide. Sheriff Ed Steele ain't onto the fact that you're Frank Galt. The reward on you reads dead or alive and warns 'em to take no chances. To them you're a hydrophobia skunk. That's why I had you fix that ferry. It'll take Steele a week to git here. He has to go to the head of the badlands, cross at Cow Island, then make the ride back here on this side. We got the *Maverick* back in good shape. She's yourn, Frank, any time you want to cross with your horse. But I wouldn't tackle the trip for a million if some law officer like Ed Steele come along and wanted to git acrost to foller Tom Jones."

"About the time he's due here, you cross over and go to Pete La Fors' place. Pete raised you from a pup. Same as you raised Settin' Bull when the other pups and their mammy died from strychnine bait that an ignorant fool put out fer wolves. When they taken you to jail, you give Settin' Bull to me to raise. When your daddy was drowned, Pete La Fors taken you. No finer feller ever lived than Pete. Only don't ever tell the old cuss I said so. Now let's git on over to your place and git supper. Settin' Bull looks kinda hungry."

CHAPTER FIVE

THEY were staying now at the Frank Galt place until the water lowered enough for Tex to get relocated at his own place at the Rocky Point Crossing. Lights showed every night at the Frank Galt cabin. Rose La Fors and the man she knew as Tom Jones would wave to one another from opposite banks of the river. Tex had refused to let Frank tell Rose or Pete of his real identity.

"Not yet, son. Not till the law quits trailin' you. Pete and Rose would die for Frank Galt. No need mixin' 'em up in it. Me and you kin handle things fer a spell. Once we prove you wasn't mixed up too bad with Grizzly Gallagher, we'll let you stand trial and beat the charges. Ed Steele is almighty proud of Frank Galt's war record. When the time comes, he'll be hollerin' for you plenty to win. But right now we got to play the game close to our belly. Me and you. To Rose and Pete you got to keep on bein' Tom Jones. Same with Ed Steele. We'll just outdodge ol' Ed and his badge-wearin' deputies."

Frank Galt and old Tex went on to the Galt ranch. They put up their horses and went to the cabin. Somebody had been there. Dirty dishes littered the table. Empty pots and a grease-lined skillet told their mute

story of visitors who had come and gone, violating the cow country code that says they should clean up the dishes after they had eaten. In that country of unlocked doors, the stranger was welcome to what a cabin offered, but he was supposed to hold sacred that law of the latch string that was never pulled in.

Tex cursed in a drawling monotone. "Lower down than sheepherders. Look at the mess they left."

They had taken tobacco and cartridges and some grub and a blanket or two. Frank shared Tex's profane mood. He was starting to clean up the cabin when he noticed a jackknife that lay near an empty whiskey jug near the bunk. He picked up the knife with its open blade. It had been used, apparently, to whittle shavings to light the fire. Frank had seen that long-bladed stock knife many times. It belonged to Grizzly Gallagher. Without saying anything to Tex about his find, he pocketed the knife. Grizzly, probably drunk, had carelessly forgotten to pick up his knife.

"How many would you say had stopped here today, Tex?"

"Five, I'd say, from the sign. Five empty plates. Five cups dirtied. Five sets of eatin' hardware. Yep, five of the damned skunks."

There was a crop-eared strawberry roan horse at the Frank Galt place. Fat and sleek after losing his heavy winter coat, the roan grazed alone in the meadow below the little ranch.

"A likely lookin' horse, Tex."

"Him and Lightnin' and Settin' Bull is kinda partners." Tex pointed to the white mule and the roan horse, greeting one another after their own fashion. The old hound sat on his haunches, nostrils twitching. It was getting dusk and the supper dishes were cleaned and laid out for morning.

The old white mule and the roan horse, followed by the hound, neared the cabin. Frank's hobbled saddle horse paid little attention to anything but the blue-joint grass he was eating out beyond the cabin.

Frank Galt, munching a half-eaten biscuit dipped in sorghum, walked towards the mule and horse and the old dog. Sitting Bull caught his scent and wagged his bony tail. Frank Galt kept walking towards the horse that stood there, ready to wheel and bolt.

"Howdy, pardner," Frank called, not raising his voice above an easy tone. "Howdy, pardner."

The roan tossed his head, circling the cowboy. Then he came closer, nickering softly; cropped ears pointed forward. And then his velvety lips were nibbling at Frank's hair, the black nose rubbing the man's face.

Frank Galt grinned as he fed the horse his biscuit and sorghum.

The horse followed him to the barn. Tex watched from the doorway of the cabin, whittling his stick. He was still watching when Frank Galt saddled the crop-eared roan and swung aboard. The roan shook his head, pitched a few jumps, then hit a long lope, head swinging, black hoofs pounding proudly. Frank rode him back to the cabin.

"Some horse, Tex."

"Yep."

"The feel of him between a man's legs is plumb joy."

"I reckon so." Tex went on whittling.

"Must have had his ears froze or cropped."

"Froze," said Tex. "Born in the early winter. Wolves dragged down his mammy. A cowboy happened up about that time and saved the colt. The mare had to be shot. But the cowboy killed the three wolves that got her. Then he wrapped the newborn colt in his overcoat and fetched it home. Raised it on a bottle and kep' it in the cabin of a cold night. Used up a brand new Hudson's Bay blanket to make a colt blanket fer that baby. Made a biscuit-eatin' nuisance outa the thing. Time it was a yearlin' it was spoiled like an only child. Time he got to be a three-year-old he was the best cow horse in Montana and a shore enough one-man bronc. That young cowboy that owned him could make him do tricks: kneel down and roll over like a dog; he could crawl under his belly or pull his tail; make him shake hands, and so on. I've seen him take the bridle off that roan and cut cattle on him. But that roan pony would paw and strike and kick a chaw out of the mouth of any other man that come near him. He ain't had a saddle on in two-three years. Nobody could set him, in the first place. In the second place old Pete La Fors would have killed the man that tried to claim that crop-eared roan. He belonged only to Frank Galt. . . ."

FRANK GALT, his weight in one stirrup, kept tugging at the untrimmed mane of the horse. He kept listening to the voice of old Tex, who kept on talking and whittling.

"Time he was a two-year-old that roan geldin' was too big to git in and out the cabin door. But he was a biscuit eater and he'd show up every mornin' and evenin' fer his biscuits. Hell, after that cowboy quit the country, me and Pete and Rose like to went broke buyin' flour and bakin' powder fer that fool horse. But there was a few months, there at first, when that crop-eared pony fell off plenty in weight. Kep' hangin' around the empty cabin here with Settin' Bull keepin' him company. And that knot-headed Lightnin' mule bustin' gates and fences to come here and hang around, keepin' that cow pony company. Yep, when that cowboy went away he shore played hell around here. . . ."

Frank Galt kept tugging at the roan's mane. He was talking in a low, husky whisper to the horse now. "Croppy . . . Croppy, pardner, I done come back. You biscuit-eatin' old camp robber . . ."

Then Tex's voice, no longer drawling: "Fer God's sake, Frank, hit the trail. Some horsebacker comin'. Git. Take the ferry acrost. I'll take care of these sons when they git here."

"It'll be Grizzly Gallagher. I ain't leavin' you alone with that gang."

"Gallagher, hell! That's Ed Steele. Clear outa here. Cross the river. No horse livin' can swim the river. You and Croppy got to take a chance on

the ferry. The *Maverick* has carried the both of you before. She'll take you over now. Drag it, Frank. Git."

Tex and Ed Steele glared at one another. Yet behind that exchange of glances there was an understanding that meant more than any spoken word.

"Where's Tom Jones?" asked the sheriff.

"Tom Jones? Don't know ary man that goes by that name. How you fixed for chawin', Ed?"

"Never mind the chawin'. The Grizzly Gallagher gang is hidin' out near here. I'm after 'em. You know where they are?"

"I ain't seen hide ner hair of ary Grizzly Gallagher. Wouldn't know him if I met him."

"But you might know Tom Jones."

"I wouldn't know ary Tom Jones if I was to meet him in hell."

"The sign says the Gallagher outfit was here. I follered their tracks here. There ain't no use in lyin' to me, Tex. What are you doin' at the Frank Galt place, anyhow?"

"Eatin' an' sleepin'. My ranch went down the river. Now take your damned hide-hunters and git outa my sight er I'll sic Settin' Bull on you."

"I ain't got a hide-hunter with me. I'm alone."

"Where'd you cross the river, anyhow?"

"After you got too mule-headed to fetch me over, I rode back to town. Ketched a train and come around to the closest town on this side. And here I am. I'm roundin' up that Grizzly outfit."

"Single-handed?"

Ed Steele grinned faintly. "Nope. Not single-handed. I'm deputizin' you to he'p me."

"Hell you are! I ain't no hide-hunter."

"I've rode a good many miles trailin' Grizzly and his damned killers. I don't want the bounty on their scabby hides any more than you do. But if you're any part of a white man you'll help me gather in them murderin' skunks. There's five of 'em close to here. I want 'em all. I'll take 'em dead or alive."

"Tom Jones, too?"

Ed Steele nodded. "That goes for Tom Jones."

"Then you got to count me out. Grizzly Gallagher and his other men might be everything the law claim they are. I reckon they need killin'. But Tom Jones don't. That feller never harmed a man in his life. I'd rather take poison than go huntin' Tom Jones."

"That bein' the case, I'll tackle the job alone. But you're under arrest for interferin' with the law. Obstructin' justice. As I come off the ridge I sighted a feller ride away from here. That feller was Tom Jones. Only one man ever set the crop-eared roan that gent was forkin'. That man was Frank Galt. It ain't easy to believe that Galt wasn't man enough to report back to me when the war was over. He was reported killed in action. The government sent me those letters and medals. There must be a hell of a mistake somewhere. Frank Galt ain't dead. He's back in Montana wearin'

the name of Tom Jones and trailin' with the dirtiest bunch of outlaws that ever rode the hoot-owl trail. He coyoted on me and I'm after him. You and old Pete La Fors is smart, ain't you? But it takes more than two whiskey-peddlin' river rats to make a fool outa me."

"Yep. Yep, Ed, it shore does. Somebody, plenty many years ago, done beat me and Pete to that job and made first-rate work of it. You can shore act like a locoed sheepherder when you set your mind to it."

FOR part of half an hour they cussed out one another. There was a sly twinkle in the blue eyes of the old river man who peddled his whiskey and ran his ferry and was a friend to the friendless. He had been watching Pete La Fors' place across the river. He saw a light show, the swinging lantern being carried down to the river bank.

"This Grizzly Gallagher gang is all on this side of the river, ain't they, Ed?" Tex drawled as he brought out his jug.

"So far as I know, they are."

"You want a deputy to help you hunt 'em?"

"Yeah, but you lyin' old—"

Tex uncorked the jug. "I'm your huckleberry."

"But what about Tom Jones or Frank Galt, whichever he is?"

"He's where you can't git to him. Now let's try out this likker. Then I'll saddle up Lightnin' and we'll round up this Grizzly Gallagher thing and them that rides with him."

On the opposite side of the bank the lantern swung back and forth, then winked out. Sheriff Ed Steele's keen eyes had not missed the signal. He looked at old Tex, grinned faintly and lifted the jug.

"I crossed the river once on the ferry when Frank Galt handled it. I mind you sayin' at the time that Frank was a better hand at makin' dangerous crossin's than any ferry man born. I reckon you was right. Here's how, you old pirate."

* * *

At Pete La Fors' ranch Rose had met the rider who came out of the dusk. Her voice choked in her throat as she saw the Croppy roan. As he swung from the saddle she was in his arms with a throaty cry that might have been a laugh or a sob. Her hands felt of his scarred face, his hair that had grayed.

"Frank! Frank!" She kept whispering it as tears wet her cheeks. "I knew you were not dead. Uncle Pete knew. But why did you fool us like you did? Calling yourself Tom Jones. Fooling a blind old man and the girl who has waited for you always. That was cruel."

In stumbling, halting sentences, while he held her close, he explained, as best he could, how he had come to be Tom Jones. "It was Settin' Bull that knew me. Then Tex. Then Croppy, see? Tex didn't want me to tell you who I was. He was afraid you might bust the law trying to help Tom Jones."

"We'd break any law for Frank Galt."

"Sheriff Ed Steele is across the river now, after me and the Gallagher gang. Tex made me pull out. So I crossed over on the ferry and rode here.

"Sheriff Steele and Tex are goin' after the Gallaghers. Two old men against Grizzly and his gang. Rose, I have to go back across. My gun is at the house."

"Pete La Fors has been waiting for you to return. I think he knows who you are. See him, then take your gun and go back across."

That meeting between Pete La Fors and Frank Galt was torn with emotion so that it had them laughing and crying and embracing each other, both trying to talk at once, with Rose doing her share.

They were so excited that they had not noticed the quick approach of the thunderstorm. It came with a blinding crash, a roll of thunder like a hundred cannons. And it left Frank Galt cowering in a far corner of the room, his face gray, his eyes filled with horror. The blind Pete could not see him. But Rose looked at him, her eyes wide, her tanned face white. She stared at him as she might have stared at a stranger. Stared at the man she loved. Stared at the stark, terrible fear stamped on his scarred face, written in his eyes.

Then Frank Galt found strength in his legs. Shame reddened his gray face. He got to the door and jerked it open. A wind-swept sheet of rain struck him but he did not feel it. He had to get away—get away and hide alone somewhere while that lightning and thunder roared down from the Montana badlands and did something terrible to a brain that had been made blank under the shell fire of France.

CHAPTER SIX

HE WAS in the saddle and gone. The black night swallowed him. He could not hear the pitiful calling of Rose and Pete, who sensed that something tragic had happened.

The wind was whipping the black river. When the lightning flashed, whitecaps showed on the muddy surface. Thunder rolled and crashed. And a bareheaded, gray-faced man on a crop-eared cow pony rode on through the storm.

Then Frank Galt remembered about Tex and Sheriff Ed Steele and the Grizzly Gallagher gang. He was there at the ferry landing.

Before him was a black, white-capped, wind-torn river that no man would try to put a ferry across. The *Maverick* strained at her moorings, pitching and groaning. As Frank Galt jumped Croppy aboard, the horse trembled but stayed game. Frank jerked the ropes free from the big cottonwood mooring post and started across a stream that no sane man would have tried. He was shivering with fear. Every crash of chain lightning made him quiver like a man struck across the eyes with a blacksnake whip. He gritted his teeth and tried not to cry out with fear. Croppy

stood on braced legs, quivering, flinching when the lightning popped too close.

A snag caught and hung up the boat. The *Maverick,* swinging, twisting, tilting, was fouled. A bad leak sprang in the upper side where the huge snag had struck. And now man and horse and boat were caught in the treacherous current, hung up in midstream. It would take hours of daylight to untangle the leaking boat from the snag. Even then the cable might snap and the boat would be carried downstream, down into the narrows where white water boiled over ragged rocks.

"Croppy . . . Croppy, pardner, you and me have crossed this river before. We got to take a chance."

Frank Galt pulled off his boots and overalls and jerked the saddle from the horse's back. "Next flash of lightnin', pardner, over we go."

And half a minute later a bare-backed horse and a half-naked man were in the water.

"We got to make 'er, pardner," Frank urged as he helped the horse through the water by sliding back and hanging onto the animal's tail. "We got two friends to help out."

A heavy snag caught them and for a few minutes they had to fight for their lives. A water horse, if ever one lived, was this crop-eared roan. And this swift-flowing old Missouri was Frank Galt's swimming hole. Even the striking of lightning nearby and the crash of thunder meant little to Frank as he struggled to extricate his horse from the branches of the water-logged cottonwood that had caught them out in the river. Croppy was fighting, making rolling, snorting sounds through his nose. Once, in his panic, he pawed Frank, tearing away a strip of leg muscle. But the man only forced a grin on his gray face and kept talking.

"You biscuit-eatin' son of a sheep-herder's burro, quit gittin' scared of this mill pond. You swum it when you was a colt. . . . Yeah. Mind the time we dropped through an air hole right after the river froze over? You kept your head then. Keep 'er now, knothead. We got to see old Tex, savvy? Tex and Settin' Bull and Lightnin'. And Sheriff Steele. They're in trouble. Swim, you water dog. Bust this crick apart."

The glare and roar of the storm was hell on earth to the man who fought the water with a game-hearted horse. An eternity, then Croppy's forefeet hit ground and they were ashore.

Exhausted, chilled, they finally landed. Croppy stood there, breathing hard. Frank wrapped up his wounded leg with a strip of his shirt. No use trying to feel comfortable. The chill of the cold water and the wet night wind numbed him to the bone. He was glad he hadn't lost his six-shooter and filled cartridge belt.

Shuddering when the lightning crashed, his scarred face twisted, blue-lipped, he headed for the ranch where he had been born and raised.

As he neared the place, he could hear, through the rumble and crash of the storm, the crackle of gunfire. It was as if every shot he heard was

sending a bullet into his body. But he kept on, riding bareback, bedraggled and cold and half clad, astride a barebacked horse. . . .

MEANWHILE, at the Frank Galt place, Sheriff Ed Steele and old Tex were having an uncomfortable time of it. They had started out to hunt the Grizzly gang. The storm had driven them back to the ranch, which they found occupied by the men they had ridden after. Grizzly Gallagher, ugly drunk and in need of shelter, had taken his men and gone to the cabin. The man on guard had warned old Tex and the sheriff with a few shots, driving them to the meager shelter of a small shed and a tier of cordwood. They dared not attempt to make the barn, a hundred yards away. Not with the flashes of lightning coming so rapidly, making it lighter than daylight.

So they squatted behind the long woodpile, shivering, cursing each other, their slickers leaking, while Grizzly Gallagher and the four outlaws with him drank whiskey and took an occasional snapshot at the two trapped men out in the storm. Grizzly bellowed taunts at the sheriff and Tex, calling them every vile name he could lay his tongue to, trying to get them out in the open.

"Good chance, Ed," said old Tex, shivering with cold, "to pick up some fresh cuss words. That feller knows 'em all."

"Come mornin', we'll have 'em set afoot here. This storm ain't lastin' all night. Directly this damned lightnin' quits, we'll turn loose their horses, there at the barn. Then we'll starve 'em out. They ain't got grub enough left by now to last 'em more than another meal. All we got to do is keep 'em holed up inside. They'll give in. We'll starve 'em out. Starve 'em outa there. Then git 'em."

"Meanwhile," Tex said, his jaw wadded with tobacco, "what are me and you goin' to do fer grub? We ain't got a bite to eat ner a drink of liquor to our name. A damned leakin' slicker and this gumbo mud hock high."

"You always did give up head when things got bad, you old whiskered mountain goat. You can slide outa this tight any time by slippin' back along the shed. Have at it."

"I'll see you kickin' hot hunks in hell first. I'm deputized, ain't I? No man kin drink my liquor and eat Frank Galt's grub and leave dirty dishes behind 'em!"

"How come, Tex," said Ed Steele, "that there was grub in the cabin?"

"Old Pete La Fors had me keep it there. He claimed that some day Frank would come home. By God, he was right. Frankie come home. Come home with a scarred-up face and his memory gone. You been askin' fer the reason for a lot of things, you damned old badge-packin' fool. Well, I'm givin' you some answers."

While the storm howled around them, old Tex told the sheriff what he knew and guessed of the whole thing. "First off, Frank was innocent of the charges against him. He wasn't near the place when somebody left

them stolen horses at Pete's place. Frank never talked at his trial. Pleaded guilty and took his medicine. Why? Because he thought old Pete La Fors might have had somethin' to do with them stolen horses. Pete wasn't no pure lily, no more than was Frank's father. Ner me. Ner you, for that matter. So Frank took the blame and pleaded guilty on account of Pete.

"But Pete didn't have a thing to do with them horses or with the stolen beef found at Frank's. The man that put them horses there, hopin' to pick 'em up, was Grizzly Gallagher. I found it out after Frank went to the war. Me not bein' so popular with the law courts, I told Rose La Fors what I know and told Rose to hop to it. But it taken time to prove the little points we needed to clear the name of a boy I figgered as bein' dead. So when Lieutenant Murphy come back from the war we got him to help. And the last mail we got, Lieutenant Murphy writes that Frank Galt's name is cleared. There ain't a charge against him."

"You mighta told a man, you old idiot. . . ."

"As fer Tom Jones, he had a hell of a small part in the only dealin's he had with Gallagher. They didn't trust him too much. They gave him the job of holdin' the horses at one train robbery. And when the shootin' started he was plumb useless. A thunder storm will make him hide like a whipped dog. That's what the war did to Frank Galt. Now, mister, is there ary more questions?"

"No more, Tex. You said a-plenty."

Old Tex grinned and spat into the mud.

CROPPY was carrying Frank Galt back to the place where he had been born, carrying him to trouble. Frank tried to keep his teeth from chattering as he gripped his six-shooter and rode out the hell of the thunderstorm.

Rain smeared the blackness. Croppy floundered and lunged through the mud. Frank Galt, half alive, rode with a six-shooter in his hand.

Once, when Croppy made a quick twist through the trees, Frank slid off. He landed hard. Things went black for a time. He came out of it holding his gun in his hand, half buried in the mud and water. Croppy was standing there, nuzzling his face, nibbling at his mud-filled hair. Frank tried to get onto his feet, but they were too stiff and cramped to move.

"Come down lower, Croppy."

The crop-eared roan was down on his knees in the clinging mud. Frank got hold of the mane, managed to get a leg across the horse's back. Then there was the feel of a horse under him as Croppy literally pulled him from the sticky gumbo.

Hard going now. Mud hock deep. Then they were near the ranch. Croppy stopped at the big pole gate.

Beyond, two hundred yards or so away, was the cabin and the barn. Croppy was bringing Frank Galt home. But it was up to the man to open the gate.

There was no shooting now. And the flashes of lightning showed no sign of life. Frank tried to lean over and pull the gate pin. He lost his balance and slid down into the mud. Then his numbed fingers found the gate pin and the big gate swung open. There was the crack of a gun as Frank sent Croppy through the gate with a slap on the rump.

The pole gate yawned open. A half-clothed man with a six-shooter in his hand, Frank Galt, was weaving an unsteady trail towards the cabin.

"Good God!" cried Tex. "That's Croppy! And there's a man!"

The bolt of lightning broke his words. Everything went blinding white, and after that came a blackness. The lightning had knocked old Tex against the tier of cordwood, stunning him. There was a high streak of flame from the cabin. Then the cabin was ablaze.

That lightning had sent Sheriff Ed Steele from cover. He was staggering like a drunken man, a carbine in his hands. Staggering out into the reflected glare from the burning cabin.

"Come out, you damned murderin' sons!" he was calling at the cabin, now in flames. "Come out and git it. Throw away your guns or fetch 'em in your hand. Come out, Grizzly!"

His words were harsh, choked, a little blurred. Frank Galt, thrown forward on his face by the lightning bolt, heard them as a man hears something in a terrible nightmare. Then his brain cleared. Something seemed to snap inside that sick brain. For a moment he stood there on his legs, his six-shooter in his hand. Everything was clear now. Sheriff Steele at the Black Coulee jail. The war. No Man's Land. The red hell of it all. Rose. Pete. Tex. Croppy. Sitting Bull. Grizzly Gallagher. All of it. Clear as a bell. From Montana to France and back again. The whole works. And that was Sheriff Steeele out yonder calling to Grizzly Gallagher to come out of the burning cabin and come out fighting. Frank Galt heard the crack of a gun. He saw the sheriff fall.

"Powder River! Let 'er buck!" cried Frank Galt.

Then a wounded sheriff and a half-stunned old ferry man saw that which they would never forget. They saw a running, half-dressed scarecrow of a man charge that cabin, yelling something about Powder River as he twisted and weaved his way, running faster than any man could possibly run through the heavy mud. They watched him twist and dodge. And they saw him dive into that burning cabin, a gun in his hand.

Sheriff Ed Steele pulled himself painfully towards the cabin. He had been shot in the leg. Old Tex, trying to gather his wits, trying to rid himself of the pain that blinded him, was staggering towards the cabin.

Even inside the blazing building there came hurtling the burly form of a man. Behind him, Frank Galt was clubbing him down with a six-shooter. The burly Grizzly dropped, lying in the mud.

"Take care of him, Tex!" grinned Frank, and was back inside.

He came out with two more, dragging them. Then another pair.

Then Frank was back inside the cabin which now was filled with smoke and flames. He was groping his way toward a sound, the sound of a whimpering, deaf, blind old dog that was trying to get out.

To see anything in the smoke was impossible. Frank had pulled his muddy, sodden shirt across his face like a mask. Blinded by the hot smoke, he dropped to his hands and knees. He could barely make out the sound of the whimpering. He felt the flames scorch his face and hair and the smoke was blinding him, suffocating him. He tried not to breathe. Seconds were eternities now as he fought in the fire on that desperate hunt for Sitting Bull.

Then there was a moist tongue licking his face. The old hound was in his arms. Blindly groping his way, he carried the whimpering old dog through the smoke and flames. Twice the hot blast of flames beat them back. Twice he went on with the dog. Then he was outside in the rain and the mud, the dog in his arms.

He could hear old Tex cussing, hear Sheriff Ed Steele telling some men that they'd hang if he could fix it thataway. Then he felt the old hound's wet tongue licking his face. After that, just blackness. And even as he lost consciousness, the old blind hound quivered a little, then lay quietly in his arms. Sitting Bull had dreamed his last dream.

You will still find old Tex and his ferry there on the river. He and Pete La Fors spend their final days of life on the river bank, talking, smoking, sipping their whiskey. Sometimes Sheriff Ed Steele rides down that way, pretending business, to spend a day or two with them. And then he rides on down the river to the ranch where a cowboy named Frank Galt lives with his wife Rose.

Seldom does Frank Galt ever mention the war. Once a former Infantry company commander visited the ranch with Lieutenant Murphy. But after the first drink of Pete's whiskey and one from Tex's jug, and the formality of thanks, they did not mention war. Frank took them back in the badlands where a cattle outfit was working and they spent a week there. No, Frank Galt never mentions the war.

He wrote two lengthy letters that concerned the war: one to a noted French surgeon, the other to a famous American surgeon who was giving his life to humanity. Perhaps, as they each wrote back, they would some day come to visit the man who had gone home from the war.

And down on the bank of the Missouri River, in Montana, gather four people. Old Tex, the blind Pete La Fors who plays the fiddle for them, Rose and Frank Galt. And on moonlight nights in the summer, sometimes, Frank and Rose take a ride along through the tall old cottonwoods. The river chuckles along its way. There is the odor of wild roses.

Frank Galt is back home. ✪✪✪

LONG SHOT

by Roy de S. Horn

Forted up in their little tinder-box shack, four hunted men kidded about crossing the Great Divide, while the hidden posse prepared for the last deadly rush. . . .

BART turned his eyes momentarily from his own loophole at the crack of the rifle, the acrid smoke in the little shack. "Get him?" he asked.

Frenchy's teeth showed in the grin the Kid knew so well. "No—but, by gar, I betcha I dust him plenty." He levered the spent cartridge out, a fresh one into the chamber.

"Throwin' away cartridges!" Jingo's voice came, hoarse, rasping. "Ain't seen nobody else drop a man the last two hours."

"Yeah?" Bart's eyes narrowed. "Ain't nobody got in close on my side. What's the difference, dustin' 'em or killin' 'em? Just so long as we keep 'em off?"

That was it. They'd kept them off now since sunrise. Better than six hours. But could they continue keeping them off? The Kid moistened his dry lips and looked out again through his own loophole gouged out between the rough-hewn logs and chinking.

Since sunrise—six hours—but it seemed to the Kid it had been a lifetime. Maybe that was because he wasn't used to this stand-off business.

Four men were in a little shack—a twelve-foot-square structure of rough logs thrown up by some long-gone trapper. But it had been a break, finding that. The posse had almost been up with them.

"Too bad!" Bart, the wizened little leader, gave a sigh. "Hadn't been for doubling up on that hoss, we'd been to hell-an'-gone away. But a man can't figger everything."

A spooky horse, and a spooky man. Both little things, happening a score of times a week in that half-broken horse country, and to no important effect. But in a holdup. . . .

Looking out the loophole, the Kid knew that now. He could see the point of rocks, two hundred yards out on the south side, where the second group of cowboys had gone to earth. But in the ceaseless nervous shifting from side to side in those dragging hours, he knew what it was like on the other three sides, too.

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Next to him, on the west side, which Jingo guarded, it was almost equally open, a long revolver shot to the nearest clump of wild plum. Frenchy guarded the front door where the little valley sloped away toward the ford and the road to town.

The east side was the hardest, and that Bart, keen-eyed and quick-triggered, had taken for himself. Back there it was fairly open too. But in the middle, not a hundred yards away, there were clumps of low scrub, waist high, and coming almost up to the cabin. In fact, knee-high sage did run practically to the cabin wall, to join the ranker brush that grew thick there from the occasional rains that drained heavily off the steep-sloping roofshakes.

That was the danger point—the scrub and sage. A man gone to earth there, if he ever reached it, would be hidden from sight from the cabin loopholes; he could work almost up to the cabin. In the daylight it would be almost impossible in the face of Bart's straight-shooting Winchester. But after dark. . .

THE Kid didn't want to think of that. Yet in spite of himself, his mind kept turning back to it. And as the Kid watched, Bart suddenly tensed his hands around his gun-grip. His gray eyes narrowed, became hawk-like. The thick log walls muffled the sound of the three quick shots, but the Kid could count them by the tripping of the trigger and the levering of shells.

"Any luck?" Frenchy's voice broke the silence that followed the shots.

Bart grunted. "Dropped the fust two hosses. That turned 'em. They all run back where they come from."

"You get the men?" Jingo's voice was sharp. "Couldn't you get 'em while they were runnin'?"

"Didn't try." Bart's answer was equally sharp. "Couple extra killin's won't keep 'em off later—there's too many to trim down. But them extra cartridges might come in handy around dark."

Dark! That was it. That was it again—what the Kid had been trying not to think of. Forted up behind these walls, they could stand off an army until dark. But when the dusk came, the deadline would come with it. In the shadows the possemen outside could snake in close, especially on that east side. Snake in close enough to throw a burning pine-knot against the cabin, onto the roof. Dry from six weeks' drought, it would burn like tinder. Flames would drive out those inside, out into the waiting guns that would by then be drawn up close.

"Ain't it hell?" Bart's voice came slow, whimsical. "That saloon-keep and gambler in town have been robbin' everybody blind for years, I betcha. But we come along an' rob the man that's robbin' them, and the whole place gets red-headed—they won't let up till us illegal robbers is burnt up or wiped out."

"Well, I reckon we be wipe' out all right," said Frenchy, almost pleasantly. "They snake in close, shoot us like rat let out of trap, huh? That dark, she don' be so good for us."

Jingo let out a curse, his voice jumpy. "If that damn hoss had been any good. . ." He glared at the Kid.

"Shore now, it was the only hoss the Kid had." Bart looked at him frowningly. "You was damn glad at the time the Kid give you a lift—you spookin' your own hoss so he broke loose an' dusted. If anybody's got any kick, looks to me like it's the Kid. Ain't everybody would of took on a double load like that, when you run around back in the dark, afoot."

"The trouble, she ain't with hoss—she's because we have to wait till two-three o'clock for them poker players go broke an' quit," said Frenchy pacifyingly. "If she go broke by midnight, like honest man, we don't get caught here by daylight! We make hills an' hide plenty—never get caught." He looked over at the bulging sack in the corner. "By damn, she tough luck. I count on that money. Go south, have beeg time, no cold ride in blizzard or pull cow out of bog-hole in spring."

The Kid looked at that sack, too. But what he was seeing wasn't a sunny Texas town, and loafing all winter. He was seeing blood on that sack. The blood of the luckless storekeeper who had blundered into the door just as Jingo was running out with the loot—blundered and then dropped like a beef in his tracks by Jingo's too-ready sixgun.

"If you hadn't gunned that old man," Bart said mildly, "we mighta got off with five-ten years in jail. But even jail is all off now. You gunned him, an' gunned him plenty dead, Jingo. They'll string us up come dark—them that's alive enough still to string up."

As if in amen to his prediction, a half-dozen bullets from outside thudded into the heavy door, jarring it on its ancient leather hinges. Frenchy glanced through the thin door crack, and then suddenly he laughed at a thought that had struck him.

"He be damn surprise, that sheriff, I betcha, when four rats run out instead of three," he chuckled. "When they caught them three hosses, they think there only three rats in here. They don't know two rats ride double on same hoss."

"Yeah—that's a fact, ain't it," said Bart. "The Kid was holding the hosses—they never seen him. An' it wasn't good dawn when they run us down in here. Well—I hope a good rider'll get that old paint hoss o' mine."

EVERYONE there had heard the yell, when, in the mid-morning, a posseman down creek had run onto and caught the three horses that the holdups had left at the cabin door. The outlaws had slapped them and sent the mounts thundering on in the faint hope that the posse would ride after them.

"Yeah," said Frenchy, nodding, "that sorrel of mine, she been damn fine horse too. Tomorrow, she get another rider that treat her bad. I be mad as hell, I betcha."

The posse outside, discouraged by Bart's accurate shooting, had relapsed into a desultory fire. Just enough to

show those inside that the ring was tight-drawn outside.

Bart let his rifle rest in the crack and lighted a cigarette. "Where you'll be tomorrow won't have nothin' to do with that sorrel, Frenchy," he said. "Not unless the Lord looks out for him. An' I reckon He ain't goin' to do anythin' about it, unless you got some mighty good deeds 'way back on your side of the ledger. What you got to your credit, Frenchy?"

Frenchy squinted his eyes and furrowed his brows in heavy thought. Then he grinned. "By gar, I almost forget. One time I save little nester kid's life. You betcha. Pull him outa quicksand almost up to his neck, by gar!"

"Yeah?" Bart looked surprised. "That's sure one to your credit, Frenchy. Wouldn't be surprised if mebbe He took that into consideration when they start the hangin' party tomorrow. Now let's see what I got, to help that paint to a decent rider."

He closed his eyes and began to count on his fingers. "Never saved no lives but my own, an' I don't guess that's no credit for nobody. Seems to me all I ever done was hell around—punch cows, drink, an' gamble—till I went on the hoot-owl trail. . . . Old Paint, looks like I sure let you down in my early youth."

He turned to the dark-faced Jingo. "Jingo, you ain't got no hoss, but you might get into the game just for the fun of it. You got any blue chips to your credit up there, to balance that storekeep you gunned, an' that time you dropped the stage driver after he had his hands up?"

"Go to hell!" spat Jingo.

"Yeah, I thought so." Bart turned to the Kid. "Well, what about you, Kid? What you done for your feller-man, 'fore you met up with us in that saloon, week or so back? Course I know you saved Jingo's hide, here, lendin' him the back of your saddle last night. But that's liable to be more of a li'bility than an asset."

The Kid drew a deep breath and was silent. His face was drawn and white.

"Mebbe I put the question wrong," said Bart, half grinning. "Mebbe I oughta asked about the other side of your ledger. You ain't old enough to be real steeped in crime. Outside o' last night's holdup, what you done ag'in your feller-man? Done any rustlin'?"

The Kid shook his head.

"Killed anybody?"

The Kid nodded slowly. "I killed a man last month. That's—that's why I was on the dodge."

Bart nodded encouragingly. His wise old eyes had been seeing things all day, things that the Kid didn't even suspect. "Now we're gettin' it. How come?"

Like a man getting a heavy burden off his shoulders, the Kid drew a deep breath. "He—he was a rancher, a water hog. Me an' Bud had staked a little waterhole, was startin' us a little bitty ranch. Arnot—that was the rancher's name—come to drive us off. He shot Bud through the shoulder, so I dropped him."

"Yeah? That all?" Bart gave a snort. "Hell, killin' a water hog ain't no crime. That the reason you went on the dodge an' jined us in that hold-up?"

The Kid shook his head. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. "No. I joined because I wanted the money. Arnot is a big politico; he swung a lot of votes. I found out that the sheriff jailed Bud, charged him with murderin' Arnot. Both him an' me. I thought if I could hire a good lawyer—"

"Now I'm beginnin' to see things," said Bart softly, as if talking to himself. His eyes swept to the bulging sack in the corner. "Well, you'd have had enough to buy a dozen lawyers—mebbe even the jury—if we'd got away."

But the Kid shook his head again. "I'm beginning to see things too—now. I wouldn't want any of that money, even if we got away. Bud wouldn't want any."

Bart nodded his head slowly. "Yeah, I reckon you're right. Stole money never did seem to bring me any special good luck. On the other hand, I'd a damn side rather see you an' Bud get that gold than to have it go back."

Frenchy let out an oath. "By gar, that's right! When they ketch us, he get it back, don't he? Damn! Why ain't it greenbacks, now, instead of gold? Then when they set fire to cabin to drive us out, the money, she burn up too!"

Bart suddenly walked over, gave an investigating kick at the crude bunk against Jingo's side of the wall. He grunted in satisfaction as the rotten old cross-braces broke away and the bunk bottom dropped onto the dirt floor. Stooping, he leaned the bunk bottom against the wall again. Then he nodded to the Kid.

"Git your knife out an' dig. Dig a nice big hole, right here where we can cover it with the bunk bottom. We'll pile that gold in there an' cover it with dirt, an' then, after it's a couple inches under ashes, mebbe they won't find it—afterwards. We can't take it with us, but that damn tinhorn won't get it back."

Frenchy gave a grin, and then swore. "No, by damn! They see the pile where we heap the extra dirt."

"No, they won't," said Bart quickly. "Because the Kid here is goin' to push that extra dirt out, a little at a time, through these lower cracks on my side of the wall where them bushes come up close. All right, Kid, get busy. I'll keep an eye on your loophole."

The Kid took out his knife and dug. After all, it was one way to pass the time.

The dirt under the old bunk was soft; it came out in handfuls. The Kid, under Bart's watchful eye, ripped out the sidewall chinking below the weed tops and pushed the dirt through.

From time to time Bart came to inspect the job. He shook his head. "Bigger," he ordered. "Bigger—an' deeper. Hell, we don't want that tinhorn spendin' that gold. Anyway, I got a coupla other things to go in that hole."

THE sun was sinking swiftly, the long shadows of the hills were already crawling over the landscape, when Bart at last gave the hole his approval. "That'll do," he nodded. "An' about time."

The Kid pulled himself to his feet, reached for his rifle, took a deep breath. An ominous silence had fallen over the besiegers outside.

Jingo was looking to his rifle magazine, his pistol cylinders, for the tenth time, making sure that chambers and cylinders were crammed to the limit. Bart and Frenchy were whispering between themselves again. Bart came over with something dangling in his hand. It was a money belt he had unstrapped from under his shirt. He threw it down the hole.

"Two hundred and forty dollars in that belt," he said. "Honest dollars. I made 'em nursin' cows the last two winters. I wouldn't want nobody out there gettin' them dollars, neither.

Frenchy likewise pitched in a slender roll from his pocket. "Seventy dollars," he said. "Won 'em in a hoss race—but the race was honest."

Ten minutes passed. Fifteen. The dusk was descending rapidly now, as if it were drawing down a soft, merciful curtain.

Bart pulled his old hat down.

"Ready, Frenchy?" he asked.

"You betcha."

Jingo snarled a shrill question. "What are you up to now?"

"We're goin' out," said Bart. "Out there. Ain't no use waitin' inside to be burned out like rats. They'll be creepin' up through this side brush already. We wait, an' they'll be snaked in close—so close they'll drop us before we take two steps. Me, I'd rather go out fightin'."

"Me, too," said Frenchy.

Jingo cursed. "I ain't goin'! Maybe in ten minutes, when it's darker. . ."

"Yes, you are goin'," said Bart with sudden grimness. In the gloom his pistol hammer clicked. "You're leadin' the rush, Jingo."

In the dark the Kid could hear Jingo gulp. Then Jingo slowly turned toward the door. The Kid moistened his lips, tried to swallow the thumping heart that kept bounding into his throat. He gripped his own rifle desperately, started to follow.

But Bart snapped back a thin whisper. "Hell, Kid—you forgot to dump that sack in the hole an' cover it. Get busy, quick!"

It was while the Kid was stumbling toward the sack that it happened.

He heard Jingo's crashing feet, the rush of Bart and Frenchy. They were through the door—outside.

Then the night seemed to break loose in rattling pandemonium. Shouts from outside—Frenchy's big voice uplifted, and Jingo's curses—then the crash and rattle of gunfire that set the hills to echoing with their deadly song.

They were all down, three black blotches in the dusk. No! The third blotch was moving—it was half upright again, weaving back toward the door. The Kid handed him back across the crude sill. It was Bart.

The outlaw lay for one moment, panting. Then he seemed to collect his

strength. His voice was husky, gasping.

"Never mind the gold. That's what —they'll be lookin' for!" came his gasping words. "Get into that hole, Kid! Pull the—bunk bottom over—you!"

"But you—"

"I'm done for. Do what I say—damn it!"

"Like hell I will!" The Kid's lips were taut and white. "We'll make it outa here together somehow, Bart, an'—*ugh*!"

The Kid's eyes glazed at the impact of the wounded outlaw's gun barrel against his temple. Dazedly, the Kid took a backward step, and then he was falling and stumbling downward.

He came to, lying in the hole, the bunk bottom pulled down over him.

Faintly above him he heard a sound like a body slumping to the floor. His breath caught in his throat. Footsteps, voices, were approaching outside.

Again the Kid heard those low gasping tones. Almost, he thought he heard a chuckle. The words were odd, meaningless, for the old outlaw seemed to be talking to Frenchy.

"Frenchy—I reckon my paint hoss'll have—as good a chance as your sorrell now. 'Cause—'cause I saved me a—a kid's life, too. . . ."

Then the trampling feet were at the door. Quivering in his hole, the Kid heard the exclamations at the doorsill, then the excited voices as they crowded inside. Matches snapped into flame. Someone set up an excited yell.

"Here it is, by God! The sack!"

IT WAS only when they had taken the sack and gone, taking the dead outlaws with them, that the Kid knew the meaning of those strange last words of Bart.

Because the posse had gone—gone without even more than that first quick look around. With them they had taken the gold and the three dead outlaws—and had left the Kid there alone.

For, after all, there had been only three horses. . . . ✪ ✪ ✪

LEGAL TENDER

NOBODY ever got the better of Judge Roy Bean, although one convicted criminal lit out from his Jersey Lily courtroom in Langtry, Texas, thinking that he had done so. Tom Wendler, caught redhanded with a printing press and a stack of counterfeit bills, was jailed but managed to wangle his freedom by slipping $500 to Judge Bean. Not until the guilty man was well out of the state did the anguished jurist examine the bribe and realize that he, himself, was the victim of the counterfeiter. A helpless victim? Not for long!

That week, by Judge Bean's judicial order, the only legal acceptable in Langtry county was counterfeit money.

THE FUGITIVE OF FARO FLATS

by Herbert A. Woodbury

A prophet, they say, is without honor in his own country. . . . And not all Miles Varney's gun-skill or courage could change that axiom.

MILES VARNEY rode into Faro Flats in Wyoming that fall, a fugitive. Back in Nebraska, he had killed a man. Though the man had been cheating Miles Varney at cards, he had decided not to linger for the coroner's inquest. For Nebraska juries were getting peculiar.

Just two weeks previously, Miles Varney had seen a man convicted of manslaughter who had had three honest witnesses to prove that he had allowed his adversary to draw first. A fiery little district attorney had thundered to his panel of married settlers, "If Nebraska's ever going to be safe for your wives and your children, gun law's got to go!"

The married jury had said 'Guilty." The married judge had said "Ten years."

And so, Miles Varney, after he'd killed his own man, wisely decided to take no chances. Varney had backed out through a pair of swinging doors to a hitching rail, carefully selected a horse faster than his own, and high-tailed it. He had no regrets, only the faintest twinge of nostalgic sadness at leaving behind him the country where he'd been born and brought up.

For all in all, Miles Varney guessed, he'd been born too late for Nebraska, anyway. The North Platte of his father's day had been a lusty, masculine village of saloons and gambling houses. But Miles had seen the town change to a drably respectable city of schools and churches.

Not that schools and churches didn't have their place. They did, Varney was willing to grant, in a community where men settled down and married and had children. Miles Varney simply hadn't been born for any such petticoat-dominated community; that was all. Of course, the pioneer wives brought culture and respectability into a man's coarse country. In all respects, all his life, Miles Varney always took his hat off to a woman.

Only, just the same, the autumn that he left Nebraska, he hoped that

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there wouldn't be any good women making their men build schools and churches—changing and spoiling a man's bluff, hearty paradise, in Wyoming. . . .

Main Street, in Faro Flats that night, strung itself out ahead of Miles Varney, two long muddy blocks of weather-beaten falsefronts. Two years later there were to be plank sidewalks and hissing gas street lamps in the town. But there were neither that evening when Varney sloshed his buckskin through the hog-wallow in front of the Three Star Saloon. The street was innocent of light or protection from the mud and bog-holes. Varney swung down into mud halfway up to his knees.

Music tinkled from inside the Three Star. Glasses clinked, chips clicked, and Varney heard the deep, bluff, roistering laughter of men. The mud on his boots didn't matter, he guessed.

He thrust through the swinging doors, striding up to the crowded pine bar. You could have cut the smoky air with a knife. But Miles Varney didn't mind the stench of tobacco and perspiration and old clothes and stale beer, either. He tingled a little. He'd found it, he guessed—a man's country!

He ordered a whiskey. The bartender handed him the decanter and a four-ounce glass. Varney poured out three ounces.

He had a second drink. A sort of genial glow filled him. He felt adequately relaxed, but not yet ready for a third drink, when a tall, lank, hard-looking hombre of about forty came in.

The newcomer stepped up to the bar, tossed down two gold double eagles, commanded, "Drink hearty, boys. I'm settin' up the house."

There was a rush for the brass rail. The bartender came down the line, a decanter in each hand. Varney covered his glass with his palm. "Take a rain-check on mine," he said.

The newcomer turned. He wore two guns in criss-crossed holsters. There was a star on his calfskin vest. Flat, expressionless gray-blue eyes took Varney in from tip to toe.

"Stranger," said the man in an even, measured voice, "I said I was buyin' a drink."

Varney could feel instantly that brittle tension in the air. There was abrupt silence, the feel of the crowd altered. Varney caught it, wave on wave of half excitement, half fear. Obviously the hombre with the star was *somebody*. Obviously when he ordered you to drink, you took his orders.

Varney stood there, his palm still covering his glass, elbow resting on the bar.

WHAT strange perversity possessed him, he didn't know. He could have carried the extra drink like a gentleman, or a half-dozen extra drinks. But there was something in him, the something that had driven him out of Nebraska—his inability ever to take any man's orders. His belief that a man's country meant a free country.

"And, thankin' you just the same," Varney said, "I'm not drinkin'."

He caught the little gasp along the bar, as treading gingerly, folks moved off a space. There was a wide circle suddenly around Miles Varney and the man with the star.

A well-meaning voice floated to Varney from the bartender. "Stranger, you don't understand. This is Marshal Thompson. *Bat* Thompson, partner. . . ."

Varney didn't move. The name stirred something in the archives of his memory. So this was the famous Bat Thompson, who'd once been leader of the Grand Island vigilantes—until his lynchings had become so frequent and so ruthless that his followers had revolted. Let it be Bat Thompson, then.

Miles Varney suddenly saw in Thompson a man to be respected, but there was a difference—as far as Miles Varney was concerned—between respect and servility.

He said quietly, "And my name's Varney." His tone of voice added, "*Your equal, Thompson.*"

They stood there a second, fathomless gray eyes looking into ones of fathomless brown. There was no sense to it, perhaps, no meaning. Varney might just as well have taken the drink. Or Thompson might just as well have unbent in a smile. No, there was no sense to it, except that both Varney and Thompson suddenly realized that Faro Flats wasn't big enough to hold the two of them. Something savagely primitive sparkled between the two men.

Bat Thompson's right hand started slowly down. Miles Varney's elbow came off the bar. Each man waited a split second for the other to truckle. Then two hands leaped like lightning for two holsters. The crowd dove for the shelter of tables and chairs. Two guns cleared leather. One of the guns came horizontal the fraction of a second before the other.

There was a single shot, and Bat Thompson, bewilderment written on his face, staggered back. His gun slipped from lifeless fingers as he slumped sideways and lay still.

Miles Varney stood, cool and unruffled, but faintly sad. For he wasn't a notch-cutter, and he never would be.

Back in Nebraska he had killed a man. Here in Faro Flats he had killed another man. The years were to go on, and the name of Miles Varney was to become a legend, like the name of Wild Bill Hickok or that of Billy the Kid. But he was always to feel what he now felt for a second—the faint, plaintive sadness.

In Faro Flats that night, the feeling of loneliness swam over Miles Varney. He'd had to flee Nebraska because a petticoat civilization there had made life too complicated and hedged about with rules. And now, tonight, he'd made himself an outlaw the second time. He'd shot a man who wore a star. Must he flee from here, too?

He didn't have to face the question that night. No, not for two years. For *that* night a man in black frock coat and bright-flowered waistcoat who had been standing in the door-

way opening into an office behind the bar suddenly stepped out of his shelter.

"Nice shootin', partner. Danged nice."

The voice seemed to break the tension in the dead-silent room. Men came out from behind overturned tables and chairs. His pudgy face beaming, the man in the bright-flowered waistcoat walked slowly toward Miles Varney.

"Klebe Kinkaids' my name, partner—owner of the Three Star here and mayor of Faro Flats. Welcome, stranger. The town's yours. You own it."

Sometimes a man knows as definitely when there isn't going to be trouble as he definitely senses menace in the air. And now Kinkaid's voice was friendly. The tenor and the temper of the crowd, all of a sudden, was simply that of relief and deliverance. For the past two years, Miles Varney was to learn later, Bat Thompson had had them all terrorized; had had them all—including Kinkaid—jumping through hoops. . . .

VARNEY holstered his gun, turned a contemptuous back upon the crowd, looked toward Klebe Kinkaid.

Kinkaid said, "You refused a drink with Thompson. You can refuse one with me, if you like. Or you can have Monongahela rye, bottled in bond, on the house. Chin with you a minute, partner?"

Kinkaid called for a bottle and two glasses. "Where you come from don't make no difference, stranger. Where you're headin' for interests me. I got a big stake here in this town. The Three Star, the Gold Dollar, the New Commercial House. . . . I hoped once to make a mint o' money. Only, the big trail outfits have been shyin' clear of the town lately. Too tough for 'em, with the gang o' shysters and pickpockets and cheap tinhorns Bat Thompson brung in here with him."

Two dreamy, greedy blue eyes glinting in his pudgy face, Kinkaid went on: "You took care of Thompson tonight, and, like I said, stranger, it don't make no difference where you come from or what the price is on your head. I'm mayor here. Mayor and board of aldermen, and register and coroner. All I ain't, is town marshal. And the marshal's job is open—vacant and beggin'. Name your terms, mister—bounty basis, or straight salary. The way I look at it, anyhow, I owe you five hundred bucks now for Bat. I'll make it a hundred dollars a head on. . . . Can do?"

Slowly and deliberately, Miles Varney poured the drink which he had refused from Bat Thompson. Kinkaid's voice harped on: "It's money in the bank for me, if I can get back the trailherd trade. . . . And a sanctuary for you. No deputy's ever goin' to serve extradition papers on Miles Varney with the help o' the local marshal," he chuckled. "Why? Because the local marshal'll *be* Miles Varney!"

Just as slowly as he had poured his drink, Miles Varney lifted it, Sanctuary? Safety from the law back in Nebraska? That wasn't what interested him; for *he* hadn't fled Nebraska

cravenly. Rather, he'd said good-bye to a petticoat world; he wanted a man's world.

He downed his drink. The killing had left him cold; now the warm glow crept up in him again. No, not sanctuary. But the idea captured his imagination, at that.

Town marshal!

Why, if he were town marshal here, he could make Faro Flats—what *couldn't* he make Faro Flats? He saw the dirty hog-wallow through which he'd waded, outside. He saw the room here with its dirty sawdust floor and its rough, crude pine bar. And then in contrast, he saw a town of plank sidewalks and underground sewers and gas street lights. He saw the Three Star with a bar as handsome as that of the Paxton House in Omaha, with its parquet tiles, mahogany fixtures and crystal chandeliers. . . .

It came to him that Klebe Kinkaid was right. Faro Flats needn't be little and dirty, a hog-wallow hellhole, avoided by the big trail outfits. Faro Flats could be clean and orderly and magnificent!

The sort of town North Platte had been in his father's day, before the married settler and sodbusters had come in to spoil things. Open, lusty, thoroughly masculine, but a straight town; the kind that the big trail outfits would go miles out of their way to pass through.

Eyes dimming off in dreaminess, Miles Varney saw Main Street as a sort of gilded midway, with barkers, spielers, saloons, gambling houses. The sky the limit, and not a pleasure that a red-blooded man couldn't buy. But—value received for the money he spent! Law and order with it all, and guns checked as you hit town. "Have a good time, stranger, but behave yourself. Behave yourself, or else answer to Miles Varney. . . ."

Eyes shining, Miles Varney said, "I ain't a bounty killer, Kinkaid. Make it a straight salary. A hundred a week. I'll clean up your town."

HE HAD the town cleaned up inside six months.

Miles Varney had ridden into Faro Flats, Wyoming, that fall, a fugitive. By summer of the year following, when the big cattle outfits again took the trail, he was a fugitive no longer. Next to the mayor, or maybe even more than the mayor, he was the most important man in Faro Flats and for a hundred miles around. He hadn't amassed the money that the mayor made. But then, he hadn't been interested in money. Although he could have had all he wanted.

Itinerants crowding into the town had to get Miles Varney's permission to set up their tent shows or their patent-medicine pitches. Varney could have charged about anything he liked for licenses. Instead he made a flat rate of ten dollars for any enterprise that was honest and aboveboard, and as for the crooks, Varney made it plain that they couldn't come in at any price. For he had this dream and this ideal of his.

Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither was Miles Varney's new Faro Flats. But by the summer, the year

after Miles Varney had hit the town, he had the town cleaned up, and the trail outfits and the freighters and the stages were coming through.

He'd killed Bat Thompson his first night in the town, and in the next three days he had to kill two of Bat's unconvinced friends. After that, his blunt, crisp orders were generally enough.

"Drift, shyster!" Or: "You want to shoot up the town because you lost your poke on the Three Star wheels? Better shoot up yourself, kid, not the town. Faro Flats is for men, not bawling kids!"

That summer and the second autmn passed. Klebe Kinkaid sold the site of the Three Star to the newly organized bank. Klebe built a new Three Star on down the street with a parquet tile floor and bar fixtures upon which the freight alone was twice Miles Varney's yearly salary.

Klebe Kinkaid with his Three Star and his Gold Dollar and his new annex to the New Commercial House did quite well for himself. And Miles Varney got a tremendous, vicarious thrill out of Klebe's success. For if Miles Varney had been born too late for Nebraska, he hadn't been born too late for Faro Flats.

He still had to fight, now and then, with his guns, to be sure. Some proddy, would-be badman had a drink too many some nights and got out of hand. Once in a while a pickpocket or a crooked tinhorn tried to operate in spite of Miles Varney's orders. Or sometimes a stranger hit town who was just downright cussed. And there were always, of course, the brash young damn fools simply out for glory. They were kids, mostly, who dreamed of boasting, "Varney fast? These are his guns I'm wearin', partner. I killed him. . . ."

Sure, Miles Varney, as town marshal of Faro Flats, was a gunfighter. But it wasn't quite the same as it had been back in Nebraska. The sadness and the loneliness didn't fill him quite so much these days after a killing. There was an answer now to the question of "Why the killing?" Because he was making the town safe.

Safe, it seemed for a lot of folks. A hundred thousand cattle with their herders and their bosses and their owners passed through Faro Flats that year. But a lot more folks hit Faro Flats who didn't pass through.

A man named Green built a store. A man named Meyers opened a second competing store. And often, Saturday nights, the two stores were as thronged as Klebe Kinkaid's saloons, crowded with little two-bit ranchers and their wives who'd been afraid, in the past, to shop in Faro Flats. Crowded with immigrants who were coming in to take up land: Sodbusters . . . . Settlers . . . .

THAT second fall and that second winter passed. Faro Flats had its plank sidewalks, its street lamps, its sewerage and its water system. And then, all of a sudden, one balmy spring evening, Faro Flats had its preacher!

Miles Varney, twin Colts at his hips, stood there at the busy, teeming

corner of Main and Center in the lavender dusk of a May evening. There across the street, on the steps of the Drover's National Bank, a tall, lanky young man in coarse homespun had set up a skillet flare. And there, in competition with the shouts of the barkers and the spielers from the honkytonks, the man was pitching neither snake oil, patent medicine nor cheap jewelry, but—salvation.

"Repent of your sins, oh ye of this iniquitous city. . . ."

The preacher's fiery indictment of Miles Varney's town as a city of sin followed. The preacher sat down at a tiny, portable organ. And now the girl who had been sitting there rose to sing. She was small and slender and lithe. The skillet-flare brought out the golden glints in her chestnut hair.

She lifted a voice that was childishly sweet and clear in the solemn cadences of a hymn. After a moment, the score or so of settlers in bib overalls, and their pink-ginghamed wives who had crowded round the improvised rostrum, joined in.

For a moment, in spite of himself, a soft feeling filled Miles Varney. The girl, all in white, took him back to his mother and his sisters who mourned and grieved their blacksheep son and brother. He could see the little parlor at home and the rosewood organ there.

He looked for a second into vistas and pictures from his past that he had long since forgotten.

And then, simultaneously, the anger and the fury boiled up in him. What had the preacher called Faro Flats? "City of iniquity. Sink of evil."

That wasn't right or just! The town had been wicked once, perhaps in the days when Bat Thompson and his crooked camp followers had held it in thrall. But not any more!

Varney's fists clenched. The very fact that the preacher was here tonight proved that the town was clean and orderly and decent. Two years ago the parson would have been ridden out of town on a rail. And as for the girl with him—why, women hadn't dared walk the streets of Faro Flats in those days, not even with a male escort. Whereas, tonight . . .

Varney's anger ebbed for a second as pride filled him. Across the street, on the outskirts of the crowd of intent worshipers, there had collected a handful of scoffing, heckling corner loungers and hangers-on. But the toughs restrained their interference to mild verbal heckling. There'd been one hombre there earlier with a basket of eggs. He'd taken one look at Varney and had slunk off. Varney's blood ran hot again.

The preacher owed his very safe presence here in the town to Miles Varney's twin, ivory-handled Colts. Yet what was the preacher saying about Miles Varney?

The girl, so lovely and so young, had sat down again, and the preacher, there on his feet, was declaiming:

"And if the town here is ever going to be safe for your wives and my wife, for your children and mine, gun law's got to go! By what right does this man Varney hold his office? Was

he elected by the people? By what right does a man like Kinkaid, saloon and brothel owner, make himself your mayor . . . ?"

The fiery, impassioned voice mounted and went on.

Cold and furious, and no longer trusting himself to listen, Miles Varney turned and walked on down Main Street. And the town was beautiful, he thought in injured indignation. If the preacher and his young wife didn't like it, let them go back where they came from. There were plenty of towns elsewhere that would have suited the preacher.

Let him keep out of this one; this was Miles Varney's town! Hellroaring and wide open, maybe, but the folks here wanted it that way! The red-blooded men who rode the cattle trails made detours of hundreds of miles to find it that way!

The spitting gas street lamps winked at Varney. The sound of music and laughter came to him, along with the clink of glasses, the click of chips, the whirr of the wheels and the rattle of the dice. And for the moment the misty tears almost crowded in Varney's eyes as mutely he breathed his little prayer:

"Oh, Lord, don't let them spoil Faro Flats, the way they spoiled Nebraska. . . ."

MAY and June and July drifted by. The Reverend George Peabody and his wife no longer pitched salvation from the bank steps, for folks had taken up a collection. There was a tent, now, with hundreds of benches on the vacant lot behind Mort Green's store. And almost nightly that tent was filled to overflowing.

Miles Varney drifted in occasionally. Not for the sermons which made him so furious, but to listen to the music, to hear the parson's lovely young wife sing her hymns. The size of the parson's audiences amazed Varney. He hadn't any idea that the countryside had so filled up. So many people. . . .

Nor had Klebe Kinkaid previously had any idea that so many people had settled round about Faro Flats. Klebe Kinkaid's pudgy face looked worried now; his money-greedy eyes looked troubled.

He said to Varney, "First thing we know, them folks'll realize how many of 'em there are. They'll be demandin' that election districts be set up. Petitionin' the legislature to make a township here."

Varney nodded. There was talk of such a petition already. There was underground talk, even, of a committee of vigilantes forming. Mort Green, so it was said, had agreed to be leader. But it was going to take a better man than Mort Green to challenge Miles Varney's sixgun authority!

Still Varney, like Kinkaid, wore a frown that night as he left the Three Star and commenced his midnight rounds. And yet, he didn't know, either. He'd prided himself on having the sort of town where any man would be safe to mind his own business. And in spite of himself, he did enjoy the hymns that the parson's wife sang.

Or maybe—he was never really certain—he simply enjoyed hearing the parson's wife sing them. Maybe the words coming from some dried-up old spinster wouldn't have moved him. Maybe it was just the girl, lovely and beautiful.

He never passed her on the street without lifting his hat to her. He never dropped in to hear her sing without squelching with his glance anyone in the audience who talked or whispered. There was a blank and a void in Varney's life, and there always would be.

Hater of what he called petticoat-civilization, he was never to have a woman's warm comradeship. He was always to be alone. But now, for a while, those summer months, he drew something — comfort, sweetness, he didn't know what—from the parson's wife. He hated all that she stood for. But she, herself, gave him something. . . .

He met her and spoke to her only once that summer, on the night that he left a worried Klebe Kinkaid and started out on his midnight rounds of the town. He came down Saloon Row, into the dimly lighted block below. He was passing Mort Green's store, behind which the Reverend Peabody's camp-meeting tent was pitched, when he heard the sound of voices in the dark passageway between Mort's store and the butcher shop.

A girl's voice was lifting in terror so chill that it froze Miles Varney ice-cold. She was crying, "No—no, Steve!"

A man's voice rose, insolent and sneering: "No? Then how'd you like to have me go to *him?* Tell him . . ."

The girl's voice dropped to anguished entreaty. "But you *wouldn't,* Steve. Steve, if you ever loved me, even a little, you . . ." The voice broke. "Steve, let go of me. You're hurting me. You—"

Miles Varney was into the mouth of the darkened passageway by that time. Gun drawn, he reached two shadowy figures. He didn't see the man's pinched, weasel-like face or see how utterly evil he was until later. He saw only the girl's white dress, emblem of purity, and the fuzzy, dark outline of the man beside her.

He reached the scuffling pair in a bound. He caught the man's coat collar in his left hand. With his right hand, he brought his gun muzzle crashing down on top of the man's skull. The man sagged, pole-axed. Letting him drop, Varney turned to the girl.

"And now, ma'am. . ."

He could see her better. A light had come on, upstairs in Mort Green's store. Its shaft struck the opposite wall, and the reflected glow lit up a face pale and constricted. The girl tottered. Varney had to seize her arm to keep her from falling. "And now, ma'am, a million apologies for his waylayin' you. I've tried to keep the thugs and the toughs out of here. But once in a while . . ."

It dawned on him that she wasn't listening to him. Terror, stark terror, still gripped her. It puzzled Miles

Varney, because he was certain that she wasn't timid or easily frightened. Easily frightened women didn't follow their husbands into frontier towns like Faro Flats.

VARNEY looked down at her annoyer. He was out cold—dead to the world. What was it she had said to him? *"Steve, if you ever loved me, even a little . . ."*

He didn't understand, and she wasn't explaining, and he didn't ask her to explain. He said simply, gently, "I'll be seein' you back to your wagon. It won't be necessary to come up to the jail with me to prefer charges, tonight." He thought of the lateness of the hour and of the impropriety of her being out alone so late. "It won't even be necessary for you to appear as a witness, tomorrow, if you don't want. I'll simply—"

Then she came suddenly to life, the terror apparently still gripping her. Rather, it seemed to Varney, it was an increasing terror which pricked her to speech. She caught his hand tight in supplication. "Oh, but please . . . please don't arrest him!"

"Don't arrest. . . ?" he echoed blankly.

She shook her head. "Anything but that. You see, he—I—" Her voice broke in inarticulate confusion.

Varney remembered again that she had said, *"Steve, if you ever loved me, even a little. . ."* Then the man who had twisted her wrist until she had cried out in pain was close to her? Some renegade brother or relative?

Two brown eyes besought him. "Please let him go, sir. Don't take him into court where he—" She cut it off abruptly.

Varney looked down at her. It was all too confused for him to get the underlying gist of it, but the rest of it was plain enough:

That, at all costs, she didn't want the man haled into court. He didn't cross-question her, for she was tugging at his arm, trying to drag him away.

Later, he knew why. She was hoping he hadn't even seen the pinched, ugly face of the man on the ground. Hoping that he wouldn't remember the man, and try to question him if he ever again ran into him.

Varney responded to the tug. It was beyond him, but if she wanted it so, that was all right. Why, all that summer he had been worshiping her. . . .

He moved off with her down the dark passageway to the lot with the tent. On the far side of the tent, under a willow clump, was the smaller tent and the preacher's Conestoga wagon.

The girl halted before Varney had escorted her quite that far. She said, "Thanks. And good night. . . ."

The warmth of her hand lingered for a second in his. But the tone of her voice told him that she didn't want him to escort her any farther. She'd been out alone, late, and she wanted to slip back into the little living tent, without awakening her husband.

For a sinking second Varney wondered if the meeting in the dark alley-

way could have been a tryst, a rendezvous with some renegade lover. Only, he couldn't believe it.

He bade her good night. It was the one and only time he ever talked to her. But all the rest of his life he was to remember her. She was lovely, she was beautiful. He might hate, and he was to go on hating, the petticoat civilization which she and her husband were endeavoring to bring to Faro Flats. But later, in the wilds of Montana, and still, still later, when Miles Varney was a lonely old man in the wilds of the Yukon, it was to seem to him that for a while, that summer in Faro Flats, he'd found . . .

What *did* he find? What is there in life for a restless man like Varney to find, except violence?

He dropped into the gospel-meeting tent the next night. He heard the girl sing, saw her standing there as pale and shaken and frightened as she had appeared the night before. He lingered a moment to hear a wisp of her husband's sermon, and it was the same old tripe: City of iniquity, Faro Flats. . . . The thieving roulette wheels at the Three Star. . . . The youngster from Texas who'd lost his poke last week and committed suicide. The weak husbands who spent their wages on the rouged floozies at the Gold Dollar, instead of on their families. . . .

It sickened Miles Varney to listen. Sure, there were the weaklings in this world. But was Faro Flats responsible for the weaklings? This was a man's town! Let the weaklings stay out of it.

He left the gospel tent. He wandered up the street to the Three Star. Klebe Kinkaid met him, wearing the first smile that Klebe had worn in weeks. It wreathed the fat, pudgy face. The bright little money-greedy eyes sparkled.

"Job for you," Kinkaid said. "Warrant for you to serve. . . ."

Taking Varney's arm, Klebe Kinkaid led Miles Varney into his sumptuous, leather-upholstered private office.

ON A divan sat a man with the evil, pinched face of a weasel. Varney hadn't seen his face the night before, but there was a bloody bandage on the man's head. And when the man spoke, Varney recognized the voice. He was "Steve" of the previous midnight.

Kinkaid said, "Meet Mr. St. Claire, Varney—Mrs. Peabody's first husband. Or maybe—maybe I'd better say, Mrs. Peabody's only legal husband."

Varney froze. Steve St. Claire acknowledged the introduction. "Mrs. Peabody's only legal husband," was, he said quite correct. And he told his story in a flat, leering monotone.

He'd married the girl when she was sixteen and in the chorus of a traveling show. The federal officers in St. Louis had got on his trail for passing counterfeit money. Leaving his wife, he'd headed for Kansas City, registered at a cheap hotel.

The place had burned to the ground that night. Somebody had identified a charred body as St. Claire's. . . .

St. Claire helped himself to a drink of Monongahela rye out of Kinkaid's private bottle. All that was five years ago. With a federal indictment hanging over his head, he'd been glad enough to be thought dead. Recently, though, he'd learned two things. That the federal witnesses who were to have appeared against him were both dead, which made him a free man. And that his wife, converted to religion, had married a parson.

He'd located the girl here, tried to blackmail her, tried to make her steal the fund that was being raised for a new, permanent brick church as the price of his silence. She'd refused, and . . .

"And," grinned Klebe Kinkaid, "here we are, Varney. St. Claire, with an eye to business, walks in on me and asks me if I'd be interested in certain documents, tendin' to prove the parson's wife a bigamist." Kinkaid smirked. "I'm payin' St. Claire a thousand dollars. You're goin' down to the gospel tent jest about closin' time tonight and arrest him an' the girl.

"And that's the end of the parson's reform movement, Varney. It's our town again—yours and mine, lock, stock and barrel. Folks'll turn on the parson and his wife as quick as they flocked around 'em. Hypocrites! Declaimin' against sin, when they're livin' in sin. . . . No worry about vigilantes now, Varney. Mort Green ain't a big enough man to organize 'em by himself. The whole reform movement'll collapse like a house of cards."

Miles Varney steadied himself. Beginning two years ago, he'd built Faro Flats from a hog-wallow into what to him, today, was a beautiful city. A bluff, hearty, man's city. And, like Kinkaid, he hated the parson who was trying to destroy all that he had so lovingly and so laboriously built. This was Miles Varney's city—not the parson's!

Yes, this was Miles Varney's city, and he'd run it as he saw fit! Varney's right hand hooked into his gunbelt. He said quietly, "I'll take them documents you paid a thousand dollars for, Kinkaid. I'll take 'em and destroy 'em!"

The mayor of Faro Flats stared at him. "Take 'em and. . . ?"

Varney nodded. "It ain't fair, and it ain't just. She married the parson in good faith. She didn't know St. Claire was still livin'."

Their eyes held each othere's for an instant, the marshal's and the mayor's. Then Kinkaid's voice came softly. "You ain't forgettin' are you, Varney, that I made you? That I give you sanctuary here?" Kinkaid's eyes narrowed. "There's a letter on my desk; come this mornin' from the governor of the territory. It mentions a Varney that the state of Nebraska wanted extradited. The governor's wonderin' if it could be the same Miles Varney, who . . . Well, I ain't answered that letter yet. No, and don't go reachin' for iron, Varney. Killin' me ain't no solution to your worries. You kill the mayor of Faro Flats, and by God, star or no star—"

"Star or no star," Varney said quietly, "I'll be an outlaw and a fugi-

tive, Klebe. You're right. Star or no star, a man don't kill the mayor and get off scott-free. But I'm countin' to five, Kinkaid. One . . . two . . . three . . ."

Varney stood there, thinking how ironically ridiculous it was. He didn't want the parson here, bringing in petticoat civilization. He wanted the town to stay as it had been, with Klebe Kinkaid as mayor, Miles Varney as town marshal. And yet . . .

OUT of the corner of his eye, he saw the pinched, weasel-faced St. Claire dart a questioning glance at Kinkaid.

"Four . . ."

He nimbly sidestepped the chair that Steve St. Claire hurled at him from his unguarded flank. Leaping away from the chair, he gave the man time enough to reach for his gun. He whirled to face him, knowing that in doing so, he was allowing Kinkaid to draw. He felt St. Claire's white-hot bullet furrow his cheek. Calmly, he squeezed the trigger once. St. Claire went reeling back, toppling over the brink of eternity. Kinkaid's bullet blasted over his head.

He flipped his wrist sideways. He squeezed the trigger a second time . .

He crossed to Klebe Kinkaid's body and rifled the man's pocket of the documents. He was kneeling there, burning the papers on the empty hearth when the office door swung open.

Mort Green stood there. Mort, who was organizing his vigilantes. Varney could have dropped Mort in his tracks, before the man could slam the door and race outside, down the street, to the gospel tent to spread the tidings.

He could have dropped him before Mort could burst in on the gathering of settlers and say, "Seen it with my own eyes. Kinkaid and a stranger dead. Varney with the smokin' gun still in his hand. That makes it a grand slam, folks! Varney kills Kinkaid, and now we got an excuse to hang Varney. . . ."

Yes, if there'd been any point in blasting Mort Green into eternity, Miles Varney could have done it. Only, there didn't seem to be any point to it. The parson had a huge following. This was the parson's town, now, not Miles Varney's.

Varney might have killed Mort, but he couldn't kill all of them. And besides, Mort mightn't make a bad town marshal himself some day. Mort Green wasn't exactly chained lightning with his gun. But he didn't need to be. Miles Varney had tamed the town. Folks didn't have to wear guns any more. . . .

Miles Varney ground under his heel the last of the black ashes. He didn't hurry. He stepped out of Kinkaid's private office. He put a hundred-dollar bill on the bar, ordered drinks for the house. Then he walked outside, across the plank sidewalk to the hitching rail. It'd take the amateur posse twenty minutes to half an hour to get organized, he guessed.

He swung up into the saddle and spurred away. A mile out of town, he pulled in his horse and took a last,

lingering look back at the twinkling street lamps of Faro Flats in the hollow below him. Then he reined west again. And again, he left without regrets. . . .

Well, with perhaps only the faintest nostalgic twinge of sadness. For he saw that his work in Faro Flats was done—done too well, maybe. It was done so well that folks like the parson had found it safe to come in and spoil what he'd built. But that was beside the point. He couldn't have done anything differently, he knew.

He rode on, with alternate loneliness and warmth filling him. He'd ridden into Faro Flats a fugitive, and he was leaving Faro Flats a fugitive. And no doubt the rest of his life he'd be a fugitive more often than not. He was lonely, as a man might very well be, who was watching his world topple about him.

Then, for a tiny minute, he saw himself in the perspective of time and of space. It came to him that *all* he had built wasn't going to perish. Some of it was going to endure, and be the very foundation that the parson built upon.

Funny. The parson couldn't build the Faro Flats of tomorrow, if Miles Varney hadn't first built the Faro Flats of today. Varney had cleaned out the Bat Thompsons, and the parson would have been helpless if Varney hadn't done that with guns. Yep, funny—the building of America somehow required both of them, the gunfighter and the parson.

The moonlit trail stretched ahead of Miles Varney. Early autumn was in the chill night air. He came down through sycamores and walnuts and oaks that had begun to drop their leaves.

He knew that they had struck gold in Nevada and copper in Montana, and it occurred to him that maybe, in some hellroaring boom mining town, he'd find a man's lusty country again—to be tamed by Miles Varney. And then handed over to some other parson?

He spurred forward, and behind him the miles fell away. ✪ ✪ ✪

FRONTIER JUSTICE

ON THE day that Henry "Red" Dawson was scheduled to be sentenced, a crowd of some four hundred Calaveras County citizens gathered eagerly in the courtroom. The judge, it was rumored, had sworn to throw the book at him, and he did. "For abetting murder and cattle rustling, ninety-nine years," the judge intoned. "For kidnaping, ninety-nine years. Shooting Amos Landry, ninety-nine years. Stealing a set of harness, ninety-nine years. Disturbing the peace ten times, ninety-nine years each. Total sentence, 1368 years!" The judge paused. "However," he continued, "since you are the sole support of your widowed mother, the sentence is suspended!"

A DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

by Oliver King

Fate took Jed McCready and made him a traitor. But it took a woman to turn him into a killer.

THE early sun lanced across the dusty street and drove through the windows of the bank. In this radiance, the knob of the vault glittered like a stage jewel under a spotlight.

In the cobwebbed obscurity of the vacant room above the Lost Maverick Saloon, Jed McCready gripped the Army field glasses in sweating hands and put them to his eyes.

It was nine o'clock, and the beat of the sun on the building tops was already like the stroke of a brazen hammer, but that was not the reason for the sweat on McCready's hands, or the moisture that wet his forehead.

In a moment, the black-coated figure of Zeke Lanton, president and owner of the Sampson Bank, moved to the vault and his gnarled, vulture-like hands worked the combination knob. No one else, not even Baldy McPherson, cashier, paying teller and bookkeeper combined, knew the combination of that vault. It was said of Zeke Lanton that he wouldn't have given the first number of it to his own mother, for fear she would guess the rest.

But Jed McCready knew it now, after days of watching, and the knowledge of it caused him to tremble.

He took the glasses from his eyes and transferred it to a resting place at his belt under his shirt, and drew a long, quivering breath. Then he cursed softly and swabbed his forehead and hands with his bandanna.

After that he moved swiftly to the door, listened a moment, then opened it silently. Nobody must realize that he had been in that room, for fear that afterwards they would guess why he had been there.

He stepped out carefully and moved down the hallway to the back stairs. At the bar, a moment later, he ordered whiskey. It was his sec-

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ond that morning and Swab Simpson looked at him curiously.

"You're gittin' to be a reg'lar mornin' drinker, Jed," he remarked genially.

McCready's eyes flashed upward, veiling a startled look. "Got so a man can't have a drink without you givin' up head about it?" he snapped.

The bartender looked surprised "No offense, Jed," he said, a trifle sulkily. "Thought I knew you well enough to pass a friendly remark. I was jest wonderin' if things was goin' all right with you."

The lean, clean-cut face before him was set in sudden lines of bitterness.

Swab Simpson mopped his brow uncomfortably. "This here drought —" he began, but his customer had tossed off his drink and was already going toward the door.

Outside, a grizzled man with a paunch drove down the street in a buckboard and pulled up before McCready.

"Hoped I'd see you, son," he said, "Your mother told me you'd come into town."

Jed McCready eyed him, his mouth still bitter. "I s'pose you gave her some more dope for the pain," he said harshly.

Doc Grimshaw's plump face took on a look of protest and concern. "There ain't nothin' else I can do, Jed, unless I break that thighbone again an' see if she won't heal better. It's what I wanted to see you about. It's like I told you—it's a case that's too tough for me. Son, some way you got to git hold of enough money to take her up to one of them big city surgeons. There's a feller up to Denver—"

"That's easy to say," Jed told him sullenly.

"Won't Lanton let you have the money?"

"Do you think I haven't asked him?" Jed flared. "Listen—this is my mother. Do you think I don't remember how she took care of me when I was a shaver, every time I got hurt? When dad was dyin' he made me promise to look after her. 'She'll be needin' you now, son. Take care of her—don't let nothin' happen to her, ever.' He told me that, the last words he ever said." He had to set his teeth to keep his voice from breaking.

"Lanton?" he went on harshly. "What the hell does he care about us —or about anythin' but money-grabbin' and his damn feud with Jorg Berdoo! I hope to God both of 'em fight one another until they're broke —broke or full of lead!"

Doc Grimshaw made a movement of distress. "I wish I could help you son, but folks haven't been doin' much payin' lately—a sawbones is purty near the last . . . Those cattle of yours—can't you get somebody to take 'em off your hands?"

Jed McCready's laugh was like the scrape of a file. "Cattle? You might better have fleas. They'd be less trouble. Sixty miles to drive 'em to market, an' every water hole along the trail dried up! Might as well let 'em die where they are. Think Lanton'd lend me money fer that—with

half the value of my beef mortgaged anyhow? I tell you, Doc, if it don't rain . . ."

His clenched, lifted fists shook with the sudden intensity of his passion. Then his hands dropped and his face was suddenly too quiet, too careful, secret. He turned away as though he had forgotten the man he had been talking to.

DOWN the street a girl slid from the saddle of a red and white pinto before the rack of the general store. Beside her, on mounts which bore the same Moonstone brand as her own were two men—one of them slender, gray-haired, with a back like a ramrod and a sharp jut of jaw; the other, big, tough, with too-wide, too-pale blue eyes and a sensual mouth with an impression of cruelty about it.

The older men walked at once into the general store. The girl, behind him, stopped to look at a display of kitchen ware in the window. The heavy-set man paused to loosen the cinches on all three horses, his movements oddly swift and easy for his bulk, his manner full of a leisurely insolence. That was Rance Kling, foreman of Berdoo's Moonstone spread.

Jed McCready stood on the boardwalk, looking at him. The wind blew down that street, whirling the dust in little eddies, rippling the shirt tight against McCready's flat-muscled chest and lean, whip-corded shoulders. It was a dry wind, hot and strong, with a grit of sand in it. It had been blowing for weeks, just like that, with almost no variation in its force—relentless, persistent, insensate. It rasped on Jed McCready's nerves now, as it had done for too long—as it had rasped the nerves of men throughout a summer in which the grass burned to dry straw at its roots and the cattle thinned, bellowing thirstily. When men throughout the cattle country groaned and cursed, and made hot, deadly quarrels out of nothing.

The heat of it, the thrust and intolerable scrape of it was in McCready's veins now, ripping along nerve centers tried beyond endurance by helplessness and vain hope and tried even more by the long agony of a woman, bedridden, racked by a pain as persistent and unfeeling as that wind. The vision of Rance Kling blurred suddenly before McCready's hot eyes, stood fuzzily etched through a red haze.

Then, as though it were a movement long considered, planned and sure, he walked forward. As he walked, the corner of his eye held the picture of the girl standing before the store window. McCready reserved for that picture a special corner of his anger.

There had been a time when this slim, high-headed girl had been a glory in his mind—a time when she, too, had looked on him with what seemed to be special favor. That was before the advent of Rance Kling and the beginning of Jed McCready's troubles with the big Moonstone spread. Now her gaze held nothing but disdain for him, and he met it

with assumed indifference behind which lurked an unreasonable rage.

The sight of her was additional fuel to the emotion that drove him toward Rance Kling.

He came to a halt just two paces in front of the big foreman, who turned to face him with slow, deliberate insolence.

"I'm goin' to lick hell out of you, Kling," he announced, narrow-eyed. I'm goin' to tromp your ears down to remind you not to cut the fence at my water hole again."

Kling's eyes glinted sudden wariness. He drew in a long breath that flexed the muscles over his big chest and sent his shoulders jutting forward like the slow, arrested thrust of a locomotive's pistons.

"You got any proof it was me that cut your fence?" he growled.

"I don't need it," Jed snapped. "You tryin' to lie out of it?"

The foreman's mouth drew back in an insolent sarl. "Mebbe the wire just busted by itself. Mebbe that's how come we keep losing' cattle. . . ."

An unwary watcher could never have told how McCready covered the space between them. One moment his lithe, slender body was a good six feet away; the next, his right fist was smashing into the sneer on Kling's mouth.

It was a blow like a driven sledge. It smeared the snarling mouth into something red and shapeless and pulpy. It drove the big foreman back something red and shapeless and But it did not knock him from his feet.

With a roar he came charging in.

As Jed sidestepped, Kling's big fist swung past the smaller man's head in a blow that looked as though it would break the skull it struck. McCready whipped over a short, sharp left that landed hard on the foreman's eye. His right ripped in, in a jarring liver blow.

Kling grunted, momentarily dazed.

McCready's fists ripped like driven pistons. Coldly, savagely, skillfully, he cut the big man to ribbons. Half-blinded, jarred to the center of his brain, the foreman flailed, covered, grunted, went down.

Cat-footed, cold-eyed, Jed stepped back as Kling got up and again bore in. Jed swung his right from the hip. It landed flush on the point of the jaw—a hundred and eighty pounds of range-tempered muscle behind it. Kling rocked, his eyes showing suddenly white. He buckled at the knees and slid slowly, face down, into the dust.

Jed stood, muscles tense, eyes deadly alert, breathing hard.

Then he became aware of the crowd that had gathered from nowhere, thick around him, and the voice of a girl, quivering, full of furious contempt: "You brawling bully." The voice broke suddenly, with an overtone of hysterical tears in it.

And then Jorg Berdoo's voice, heavy, cold, with the rasp of dangerous anger behind it: "By God, you've gone too far, you rustlin' skunk. I've put up with enough from you. Jump one of my men again—cross my trail again in any way—an' I'll know how

to deal with you. An' that's fair warnin!"

Jed swung on him, eyes blazing. "You range hog! You've cut my fences, burned my alfalfa and denied me the right to drive my cattle over your range to market. You know it means ruin if I have to drive aroun' your spread—but you an' your foreman have told me to be ruined an' be damned. To hell with you! I've had plenty of you, too. When that fat hog wakes up, tell him that the next time he bothers me, I won't have a fist for him—I'll have hot lead! An' the same goes for you!"

He turned away raging, his glance sweeping in the horrified gaze of Alicia Berdoo, who stood looking at him as though he were a murderer. He turned until he met the dead, fish-eyed stare of Zeke Lanton.

The banker's face was bland and expressionless.

"Nice fightin', Jed," he remarked evenly, and held out his hand.

Gripped in his fingers was an object which Jed did not immediately recognize.

"Here's somethin' I think you dropped," Lanton said tonelessly.

It was the field glasses which, during the fight, had evidently slipped from its place under his belt. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

OUTSIDE, the deep, soft dark of the cow-country night pressed against the windows. Inside by the light of the single kerosene lamp placed on a table near the bed, Beth McCready fought to conceal the pain that racked her.

She looked anxiously at her son, who paced the floor restlessly, lost in some train of thought from which, evidently, he meant to shut her out.

After an interval, he turned abruptly and went to where his hat hung on a peg. "I've got a little ridin' to do, mom," he said briefly.

"Son"—her frail voice was troubled—"you've got somethin' on your mind you're not tellin' me. What is it? Don't you be goin' out to get into trouble now."

He forced a smile. "I'm not," he told her. "I just want to have a look at the fences up along the north pasture. They've been gettin' cut pretty often of late. I'll be back soon."

He rode north only far enough for the sound of his horse's direction to deceive her, then he swung in a circle toward the road to town.

Having made his decision, he tried to keep his thoughts free of anything but the practical considerations before him. But as he rode the whole weary circle of his thinking during the last days began again automatically, so that once he drew up and half turned back, appalled by what he intended to do.

He had lived here in this country all his life, as his father had before him. There wasn't anybody who knew him who wouldn't have trusted his honesty without limit. The name he bore stood for that. There hadn't been a crooked bone in old Buck McCready's body, and nobody had ever had any reason to believe that his

son wasn't a chip off the old block.

That was what made the thing he was about to do somehow so wrong. Nobody would ever suspect him of robbing the bank. He'd be safe, hiding behind his father's name.

But would he? Berdoo's words "rustlin' skunk" still burned in his mind like acid. For that moment he had been close to killing Berdoo. But maybe there were others who could believe that kind of thing about him, too.

At that thought, his heart slowed suddenly and then rushed ahead in a sudden fast beat. It had happened every time he thought of Zeke Lanton handing him his field glasses. Had Lanton suspected anything?

At the edge of town he circled, to come in at the rear of the bank. He rode slowly, warily. This was the one point of danger. Suspicion might fall on him if he were seen coming into town.

He met no one. There were no lights there. Nothing but some empty cattle corrals nad lots full of tin cans and rubbish. Then there was a long building which was used as a kind of storehouse for the general store, and after that came the alley behind the bank.

He left his horse the other side of the store house and walked into the alley. A glimpse of the main street showed him lights from the saloons and voices came to him faintly; but there was no one moving out there who might see him.

The rear door of the bank was closed by an ordinary lock, a pass key for which he had already filed from an impression taken on wax. He let himself in without difficulty.

Pulse beating, he crept to the front room which housed the safe. His hands began to sweat. A faint noise from the dark corner at the far side of the room brought him up with his heart pounding and his hand racing toward the butt of his sixgun.

He waited tensely, the hair lifting on the back of his head, his eyes striving to cut through the darkness. The place was dark as pitch except for a vague illumination near the windows from the lights across the street.

After a long moment he relaxed, cursing himself for a nervous fool. There was nothing there. Why should there be?

He made his way to the safe and unfolded a horse blanket he had carried under his arm. Using this as a shield, hanging tent-like from the top of the safe, he lighted a lantern and set to work on the combinaton.

His throat was dry with excitement as the safe door swung suddenly open under his hand. Inside were stacks of greenbacks and canvas bags containing copper and silver.

WORKING fast, he selected a thousand dollars in small bills. That would be enough, surely, to get his mother to the city and pay the surgeon. . . .

"Back out from under that blanket with your hands high," a dry voice said behind him. "One funny move, an' I'll blow the backbone right out of you!"

Jed froze. Then he backed out, slowly, carefully. "Bring the blanket away with you," the voice said, and now Jed realized that it was Zeke Lanton's voice. "I want you outlined in the light of that lantern."

Jed obeyed, cursing himself for having gotten so absorbed in the safe and the money as not to hear the sounds Lanton must have made in getting that close to him.

"Now turn. . . . McCready, huh? I thought so. Git away from the safe an' the lantern. That'll do. Pull up an' keep reachin'."

Jed tensed as the banker, gun in hand, stooped to pick up the lantern, but his captor never took his eyes from him; gave him not the slightest chance.

"Get into my office," Lanton ordered. "We'll see what this is all about."

In the banker's office, with the shade down and the light turned high, Jed faced his captor grimly, trying to give no sign that the bottom of his stomach felt as if it had fallen out.

He was still hoping for a chance to jump Lanton, though now he knew it that it would be nearly useless to do so unless he were willing to kill. He had been disarmed and was pretty near helpless as long as the other man stayed on his guard.

"Well, you got me," he said, trying to make his voice sound calm. "How'd you get onto me?"

The banker eyed him shrewdly, a glint of satisfaction behind his gaze. "Caught a glimpse of somebody moving, up in the room over the saloon. I wondered about it, an' then you came out an' went up the street. When those glasses dropped out of your shirt, I began to put two and two together."

Jet set his teeth and said nothing. He was trying to keep out of his mind the vision of what his mother's face would be like when she heard he was in jail—and what would happen to her with nobody to take care of her.

"Need the money for your mother?" Lanton asked, as though reading his thoughts.

A flick of anger ran through Jed's mind. "Smart figgerin'—since you knew I was tryin' to borrow for that," he said sarcastically.

"If I ran this bank by takin' paper without good security, it wouldn't last long," Lanton said drily. "Now, if Berdoo wanted to borrow some money . . ." His voice trailed off significantly.

A spasm of fury rippled across Jed's face. Berdoo! "He's a damn range hog," he ripped out. "He'd like nothin' better than to see me ruined so he could get my land."

The satisfaction in Lanton's eyes was open now. "How'd you like a chance to get back at him?" he asked. "An' get out of the jam you're in at the same time?"

Jed stared. "What do you mean?" he asked suspiciously.

Lanton narrowed his gaze. "Reckon you know I ain't got much love for Berdoo," he said. "He's been tryin' to run this county too long. Now I've thought of a way to break him. He's spread thin, an' this drought has

hurt him bad. But he's figurin' to run a thousand head of cattle to market, in time to take up some of his paper. If he don't, he's busted. I've figured a way to keep him from doin' it. How'd you like to play in with me?"

Jed caught a long, deep breath. His knees began to shake a little. To hide it, he stepped sideways to a chair and sat down.

"Go on," he said.

"There'd be a thousand dollars in it for you," the banker told him softly. "The same thousand I just took out of your pockets. An' I'd be willin' to forget what happened here tonight."

"Keep talkin'."

Lanton shook his head. "I've known you a long time, Jed," he said. "You're word's good with me. But until I know you're willin' to go along with me, I'm not talkin' any more."

Jed's jaw set. "You got me, Lanton. I'll do what you want, short of murder. An' willin'ly, if it's to bust Jorg Berdoo."

JED MCCREADY rode with a grim face and a heavy heart in the days that followed. It did little good to assure himself that his mother counted more than any set of principles, that Jorg Berdoo had this coming to him. The fact remained that he, Jed McCready, the son of straight-shooting Buck McCready, was a common cowthief. All his long years of being an honest cattleman revolted him at the thought.

At times he told himself that it was not rustling. It was merely hiding cattle so that Berdoo couldn't find them in time to meet his notes. But he knew that was merely an excuse. When Berdoo had lost his spread and Zeke Lanton had bought it in, Zeke would know where the cattle were, would own them without having paid for them. While he, Jed McCready, put the wages of shame in his pocket.

Robbing the bank had not, somehow, seemed so bad to him. Riding the outlaw trail openly, as a rustler, would have been comparatively tolerable to him. But this business of posing as an honest man and stealing cattle from a neighbor—even an unfriendly neighbor—went against the grain.

He set his jaw and looked up at the far bulk of Broken Nose Mesa, towering in the distance against the metallic blue of the sky. Broken Nose Mesa, up which cattle could find no way—to which not even a stray prospector bent his way.

He had begun to hate the wide, upthrust mass of it. For there was a way to get cattle up to the top of Broken Nose, and Zeke Lanton had found it. Moreover, on its wide top there was grass and water enough to hold better than a thousand head for weeks.

At dawn and at dusk and at midnight, day after day, Jed McCready had been cutting out and driving small bunches of Jorg Berdoo's prime beef cattle up to the top of Broken Nose. The business had involved lying in wait like an Apache until he

knew where Berdoo's hands were riding; it had involved dust-choked hours in the dark, with the sweat streaming from himself and his jaded pony in about equal quantities. It had meant the hardesst work Jed had ever done, and the most hateful. And now the work was getting harder—and more dangerous. Discovery was becoming daily more imminent.

Rance Kling and two of his men were making a preliminary tally, spotting the cattle that would have to be rounded up within a week or two. And it was obvious to Jed that they were getting suspicious. He could see it in the way they rode wide, cutting for sign going toward the hills; in the way they sought high places and sometimes stayed concealed there for hours, watching; in the way they doubled suddenly on their own trails.

But there was no sign to see. The ceaseless thrust of the wind took care of that. It loosened the powder-dry earth from around the grass roots, ripped it up from the sides and bottoms of the washes, swept it down in ceaseless clouds from the arid hills, carried it high and whirling from the desert a hundred miles away. The endless, drifting wash of it across the hard-baked countryside destroyed what little sign there was to see almost as soon as it was made. Otherwise Jed would long since have been tracked down.

But twice now, Jed McCready had been near to being caught when he thought that no Berdoo rider could be near. Both times had been at dusk or in the half-light of dawn, and he had not seen the men who rode close to him. Only his strained, acute hearing had told him of the presence of these riders.

More than that, the cattle he wanted were getting harder and harder to find. He had gotten some three hundred head safely to the top of Broken Nose, over that hidden trail which at first he thought not even a mountain goat could have negotiated, but there must be seven or eight hundred more three-year-olds, still in good enough condition to stand the drive to market. Where were these cattle disappearing?

It was mid-afternoon now, and he turned his horse off the westernmost section of his own range and up toward the hills. Half an hour before sunset he would be on the high point of a ridge that thrust out into the grass country overlooking the Berdoo ranchhouse. That was the vantage point from which he observed the movements of the Berdoo riders and governed his own riding accordingly.

He followed gully and ravine, keeping under cover as much as possible. Suddenly he brought up, his eyes narrowing. To his right, was the entrance to a small grassy box canyon, and near the wall, where the wind had had little chance to do its work, he saw the fresh print of a hoof.

His hand flashed to his sixgun. That print had been made within the hour. He sat there a long moment, eyes darting around him, taking in

the possibilities of ambush. He was on the Berdoo range.

CHAPTER THREE

NOTHING moved around him, nothing broke the silence of the canyon. He slid the gun back into his holster, and passed a slow hand over his bloodshot eyes. The heat was getting him, he told himself—that and the lack of sleep.

He sat, trying to make his tired feverish thoughts take on some semblance of order. The dry wind poured down the canyon like some relentless, unvarying stream from Hell. It rasped the moisture from his skin even as it came from the pores, leaving a deposit of salt there. Even with the relief of knowing that he might get the money he needed for his mother, his hatred of that unceasing, cattle-killing wind had not diminished. He knew that it was responsible for most of his troubles. The constant sound in his ears obscured his thoughts, made his mind work slowly.

After a moment he got down from his horse and slowly went into the box canyon. There were the remains of a fire, and signs that showed several men had camped there.

His eyes narrowed. This was not a camp made by Berdoo riders. He had checked their movements the night before and this morning as well. It came to him suddenly that these men might have something to do with the fact that he had been running into riders where no Berdoo men, according to his calculations, should have been. They might have something to do with the fact, also, that he was finding it harder and harder to find prime beef cattle. Rustlers!

The idea stirred all his natural cattleman's resentment, until it came to him that he was also one of the breed, and he laughed harshly, aloud.

He rode on, wary, thoughtful, until a bend in the trail brought him face to face with Alicia Berdoo. He rode toward her, his face hardening.

The girl was sitting her horse beside the trail, motionless, and he understood at once that his laugh had probably brought her to a standstill and enabled her to surprise him.

She watched him with clouded eyes, and he thought that he read puzzlement in them. As he came closer, he saw her holster a pearl-handled gun which she had been holding over her saddle horn.

"What are you doing on Berdoo range?" she challenged abruptly.

His eyes glinted. "Takin' a little ride—for the exercise," he told her.

Anger showed on her face, but her next words were surprising. "Don't you know that Rance Kling has given orders to shoot you on sight if you cross our line?"

It was as though she were more interested in warning him than in being angry at him for trespassing.

Surprise showed in his eyes and softened the set of his face, but the hot madness of fatigue and drought spoke through his lips, nonetheless. "Would that hurt your feelin's any?" he asked. "I wonder you didn't have a try at it yourself."

Strangely, the statement evoked no resentment. She said, almost gently. "I'm sorry we've got so crosswise, Jed. Rance has been sayin' that you were rustling our stuff, and I guess that put me off. . . ."

"I can't prove I wasn't," he said harshly.

"Maybe I've had reason to change my mind."

"An' mebbe you'll have reason to change it again," he retorted somberly. "Give a dog a bad name . . ." He picked up his reins so that his pony started on. "Be a good idea if you didn't go rammin' aroun' these hills by yourself," he told her, with an oblique glance.

"Maybe it's a good thing I do," she told him enigmatically.

He pulled up sharp. "I'll wait here an' see you on your way back," he said.

Color stained her face and for a moment her eyes blazed. "Something around you don't want me to see, perhaps?"

"Suit yourself. I'm waitin' until you ride back."

Her hand shook a little as she lifted her reins and forced her pony up to his. "I'll be glad to ride back," she told him, white-faced. "I'll be glad to let you order me about on my own range. Just so long as I never have to see you again!"

She set spurs to the pony and took the back trail at a gallop.

Jed McCready's face, watching the slender, alluring sway of her body in perfect time to the horse's pace, looked suddenly lined and stricken.

IT CAME to him then, that through pride he had been lying to himself for months. He was not indifferent to this shining-headed girl. She was, instead, worth all of life to him. And he knew in the same instant that he had lost her forever. So long as the crime of stealing her father's cattle and ruining her along with him was on his conscience he could never go to her.

All that night, as he rode, his mind was too much occupied with that fact in all its aspects to consider anything else.

Finally, however it came to him to wonder what she had meant by saying that she had perhaps had reason to change her mind about him. Had she also gotten onto the fact that there were rustlers in the hills? And was she being wild enough to try to trap them by herself?

He shook his head stubbornly. All this was no concern of his; he had a job to do.

At that thought, his eyes narrowed. Maybe part of that job was getting rid of these other fellows himself. The money he was to get from Lanton, as well as his own safety from jail, was contingent on his getting the required number of cattle to the top of Broken Nose. If he failed in that . . .

Almost at the moment he thought that, the silence of the night quivered under the single sharp echo of a shot. It was followed by others—a quick burst of firing.

A moment later the swift drum of a horse's hoofs came to his ears.

Somebody was riding in his direction.

He shoved his horse down in the shelter of a dry wash, despite the fact that he was standing in the deep shadow thrown by Broken Nose Mesa and would scarcely be seen easily.

His straining ears told him that the first rider was followed by others at such a distance as to make it clear that they were in pursuit.

The swift thud of hoofs drew nearer. He tensed, understanding his danger. If this rider got by, the pursuit might run into him, Jed, and mistake him for the man they were after.

Suddenly a form loomed up out of the night, riding hard—a form that somehow rang a bell of familiarity in his mind. In the same instant, there was the sharp, audible crack of a snapped leg-bone and the horse went down, turning a full somersault.

The rider sailed through the air, hit heavily, rolled, and then lay still. Forgetful of caution, Jed shoved his mount out of the wash, trotted forward and leaned down from the saddle to get a good look at the fallen rider. As he did so, his breath caught sharply. The still figure on the ground was Alicia Berdoo.

He slid from the saddle swiftly, stooped and picked the girl up in his arms. He could hear the pursuit, spread out and coming hard. In a moment now they'd be on him, and the moment his horse began moving they'd spot where he was. Nothing to do but run it out.

He swung into the saddle with the unconscious girl in his arms. This was going to be hell if shooting started. His spurred horse leaped into an unwilling trot and then into a gallop.

A voice behind yelled; "This way! Come a-ridin'," and a sixgun laced the darkness with flame.

Jed heard the bullet whistle by, uncomfortably close, and gave the marksman credit for good shooting by ear.

A way of escape came to him suddenly. If he could get to the cattle trail up Broken Nose, he could lose them entirely.

Somebody shouted, "Hey! Her horse is down. There's somebody else out there with her."

Jed dug steel to his horse, flattened him to a full run, but felt him heavy under the double load. Behind, the pursuit was gaining and bullets whined close.

Jed felt the horse under him jump a little in his run, as though he had been cruelly spurred. Hit?

He drove in closer to the wall of the mesa. The entrance to the trail was not far now. If they could only hold out . . .

The girl in his arms began to stir a little, and his teeth set suddenly. She was coming awake, just in time to meet the finish, for he had suddenly realized that his horse was slowing badly.

Still—a moment more. With his heart contracted at the cruelty, he drove steel deep into the animal's flanks. The horse leaped forward in a sudden spurt of speed, slowed, went down on his knees.

Jed, watching for this, lifted him-

self and the girl in a vaulting leap, with one hand on the pommel. He landed crookedly and they both went down, he with the sudden, sharp, intolerable pain of a sprain in his ankle.

Jaw set, he got to his feet, took the still-dazed girl by the arm and half flung her toward the brush-covered entrance to the trail.

He knew that they had to move fast to keep from being heard going up, for the riders behind were already almost in sight through the darkness. Alicia seemed fully conscious now, walking without any help.

The nearest rider swept up, went by in an upthrust of flung sand, and then slid to a halt.

Jed could see him fling himself from the saddle and take shelter behind his horse before he yelled to the others. "Horse down there. They gotta be afoot, an' close. Watch the brush."

Jed found the girl's lips with a precautionary finger and took her by the elbow. They started up the steep, winding trail softly, as the other riders wheeled and drove in.

Rance Kling's voice broke the darkness, harsh and heavy: "We gotta risk bullets, hombres. Spread out and cover every inch of this ground. If she gets away, we're done."

Jed stopped in his tracks, stunned. Rance Kling trying to kill Jorg Berdoo's girl?

At Alicia's swift touch, he moved on again, but whether because of his hurt ankle or his preoccupation, he moved clumsily, stumbled and set a rock rolling down the trail.

A sixgun leaped into roaring action, its rapidly spaced shots making a constant orange-blue flicker, like heat lightning against the dark. Lead smacked onto the trail around them.

He became aware that Alicia had not moved.

"Go on!" he snapped, between clenched teeth.

Her voice came as a calm murmur, for his ear alone, but very clear. "I'll go on when you do," she said.

Rance Kling's voice came up to them, full of heavy guile: "Don't be a fool. We got you. Come down, an' nothin'll happen to you."

Jed felt the girl's hand on his arm, urgent, peremptory, and knew that she was trying to tell him he must not answer. Softly, they began moving.

Then Jed whispered, "Run," and moved forward as fast as his ankle would let him. A gun hammered the night instantly, but the first bullets were behind them and before it could speak again they were around a protecting bend in the trail.

"Hurry," Jed whispered. "Zeke Lanton's due to be up on top by now. Mebbe that'll make another gun for us."

Alicia took that without comment, and hurried. Halfway up, hearing her gasping breath, Jed stopped her with his hand on her arm and stood listening. For the moment there was no sign behind them, but he knew that once through the bushes and into the fault in the cliff which led in a wide, inner incline to the beginning

of the trail, they would soon find their way.

And once on top, they'd be trapped, for as far as he knew there was no other way to get up or down Broken Nose in the dark.

"Zeke Lanton, did you say?" Alicia asked after a moment, in the tone of one unable to quite believe her ears.

Jed said, "Yeah. Tell you about it later."

He knew in that instant that he would have to tell her. Only he couldn't face it for the moment.

"What's all this about?" he asked, nodding toward the down-trail.

"They're rustlers," the girl told him quickly. "Rance Kling's in with 'em. I got to suspecting it, but I didn't want to say anything until I knew—dad wouldn't have believed it of Rance. Tonight I saw Rance slip out and I followed him. I finally caught a little glimmer of fire up in the hills and when I got up to it I crawled forward until I could see. Kling was there with five other men, and from the talk I knew I was right. I started to crawl away but I made some noise and they came after me."

Jed swore softly, then tensed. A sound had drifted up to him from below. Kling and his men had found the trail.

He had an idea that the crowd behind would not come too quickly and carelessly. They had had a taste of his shooting in the dark and would not like to invite any more of it.

Up above, Lanton would be waiting, to make his first inspection of the work he had hired Jed to do. How much good he'd be in a gunfight, Jed didn't know. But it was a chance of help—a chance they needed badly.

On the mesa top, he drew in his breath with a little catch. There was no sign of Lanton.

"Didn't get here, I reckon," he told Alicia. "Well, the best place to hole up'll be over to the left here."

He took her by the arm and led her in the direction he indicated.

A voice spoke softly out of a clump of buckbrush. "That you, McCready?"

"Lanton?"

The lean form of the banker emerged dimly into view. "What's the ruckus?"

Buck explained rapidly. It came to him as he did so that he could not confess his share in Lanton's scheme to Alicia because to do so would involve the banker. Between them, they'd have to try to find some other explanation for his presence. The cattle on the mesa top could be charged to Kling and his gang.

"These buzzards mean business," he ended, "so there's no way to talk our way out of it. It's a case for six-guns. Kling was even willin' to shoot Alicia to keep her from talkin'."

CHAPTER FOUR

FOR what seemed an endless moment, the banker stood lost in thought. Jed could hear faint sounds down the trail which told him that the rustlers were coming up. He was about to speak again when the banker laughed a soft, dry laugh like the rustle of a

rattlesnake through sun-dried grass.

"I think I can talk my way out of it," he said. "Put 'em up, McCready."

His sixgun was in his hand.

Jed stood frozen, too shocked by the surprise of this treachery to be able to speak or move.

It was not so with Alicia Berdoo. She was standing a little to one side of the banker and near his gun arm. With a soft, swift movement like a cat in the dark, she threw herself against the arm.

The sound of the gun smashed the silence into a million echoing fragments. Then Jed was on him. His hand caught and twisted the gun free, his right fist cut a short, smashing arc to the dim face before him. In the dark he missed the jaw, but the blow sent Lanton reeling back.

Alicia's hands were suddenly fierce on his. "They're coming," she whispered. "Give me that gun. I must have lost mine when I fell."

Her fingers took the sixgun from him, and then they were off running through the dark, Jed in clumsy limping strides.

"You're hurt!" she breathed. "Did that shot get you?"

He grunted, "No," and told her about the ankle, the hurt of which he had been able to conceal up to then.

Behind them they heard Zeke Lanton's dry voice, sharp, protective: "Don't shoot, Kling. I'm a friend."

Jed stopped short. "You go on," he whispered. "Follow this little wash until you come to the knoll on your right. I want to hear this."

As he spoke, he was conscious of Kling saying: "Who the hell are you? Come over here with your paws up."

"It's Lanton," the banker told him. "I just been hearin' things that make me think we ought to get together."

"Lanton?" Kling's short laugh was grim. "What you doin' up here? Where's the girl?"

"McCready's with her," the banker told him. "They jumped me because I wouldn't throw in with 'em."

"Yeah? An' just how do you horn in on this?"

"You an' me have been playin' the same game, only not workin' it together," the banker told him. "I'm out to bust Berdoo, an' I've had McCready rustlin' your critters an throwin' 'em up here on the mesa. You throw in with me, an' I'll stick some dinero in your way."

Kling laughed harshly. "So that's where the critters have been goin'! An' now you got caught up here with McCready in a bad jackpot an' you figger to switch the deal, huh?"

"Why no, that ain't it," Lanton began, the ghost of a quiver in his voice. "I—" His voice stopped in his throat. "Wait a minute, Kling—what are you doin'?" The dry voice rose almost to a scream.

The blast of the heavy Colt .45 had in it the harsh, flat, inevitable note of doom. It spoke twice.

Zeke Lanton let his breath go in a hard, emptying gust. His hands clutched wildly at his middle. Then he toppled to the ground.

Rance Kling laughed once. "That's the finish of one of 'em," he said. "When we get the other two, things'll

be sittin' purty. That buzzard holds the paper on the ranch. When we git the rest of the cattle, an' Berdoo's busted, we'll buy 'em in all the easier. 'Specially after Berdoo gits his. We'll be runnin' this range, boys."

Jed McCready leveled his sixgun, thumb flicking back the trigger. Then he let it down slowly. In the dark he could barely make out the big form of the foreman. He slid back into the wash and started to make his way softly toward the knoll. As he turned, he collided with the soft figure of Alicia Berdoo. . . .

EVEN in that moment of tension, he felt his heart stir at the feel of her. This girl would do to ride the river with. The tighter the spot, the harder she stuck by.

Then the realization hit him hard that she had overheard Zeke Lanton tell the truth about the cattle there on the mesa top. As they stepped softly along the wash, he himself was conscious of the sounds of disturbed cattle. Yet her hand clung softly to his arm, and somehow the grip was neither stiff nor cold.

A cow, spraddle-legged and snuffling, loomed above them suddenly, snorted with alarm and crashed into the brush.

Rance Kling's voice whipped out, "They're out there, boys. Let's get 'em."

Jed quickened his pace, hearing the sound of fast, yet cautious movement behind him.

To the right, a dim, rising blackness showed him the mound he was looking for. An instant later, they had scrambled up into the brush and found places behind the rocks.

This was better. They'd be hard to hit here in the darkness, and Alicia could keep down under cover.

A scuffling step and the swish of brush below him stopped his thoughts short. He raised his sixgun, holding it at arm's length and to the side and sent lead winging in the general direction of the movement.

The blast of the shot was still in the air when the darkness spat flame from five guns. Lead smashed into the dirt or against the rocks and keened overhead, but he was down under cover and wriggling to another spot before the shots came.

Again a gun spat orange in the dark below and this time Jed whipped lead in return, aiming just below the flash. There was a grunt in the darkness, the sound of boots in a scuffling run, then the heavy sound of a man's body falling. These sounds he heard as an undercurrent to the roar of gunfire that greeted his shot.

There was a gun blasting close to his ears and he realized that Alicia Berdoo was firing it. She could shoot, too, for a sharp curse ripped out of the darkness and one of the guns there fell silent.

Sudden exultation filled him. They were whittling them down to their own size. That left only three of them in good condition.

As though to confirm what he thought, Kling's voice snarled, "Pull back, boys. This ain't gettin' us anywhere."

Jed's senses tensed. Was this a trick? Did they intend to come up from the other side? He did not believe so. It would be impossible for them to come quietly enough for that. But it was not the end, either. He would not give up so easily.

Alicia stirred beside him. He had the feeling that she had been about to say something, but had decided not to.

His voice came out, husky, involuntary: "Lanton caught me robbin' the bank. It was this or jail, an' I needed the money bad for—for a doctor."

It shamed him suddenly to be making explanations, to be pleading for her good opinion, and he lay stiff, regretting having spoken.

"I couldn't know about the jail," she said softly, "but I guessed it was for your mother. Dad had it coming to him. I'm sorry about it, Jed."

McCready caught his breath. Suddenly it wasn't possible for him to say anything at all.

"Rance Kling did that," the girl's murmur came again. "He convinced dad you were rustling, and that accounted for the cattle we kept missing. I began to suspect it was Rance, and not you. If I'd had any sense I'd have known it."

Jed said heavily, "I reckon it's too late now. I finally got to be as guilty as he said I was."

"It's not too late," Alicia contradicted him. "Why should anybody know it now? It's Kling that'll be blamed, when dad hears my story. The rest of it can be just between you and me."

Before Jed could find an answer to that, a small flower of flame grew up in the darkness before them, away to the left. It wavered, died down, then sprang up stronger and growing. At almost the same instant another flame appeared, more directly in front, then another and another, until there was a line of them. Kling and his men were firing the mesa!

The realization of what that meant stunned Jed for an instant. That hot, relentless wind was from the direction of the flames, and the fire was between them and the only means of exit from the mesa. The drought-scourged grass and brush was so much tinder. It would be a matter of seconds only before a solid wall of fire was bearing down on them, wind-driven, fierce, devouring.

A vision of the sheer walls which were their only chance of escape came to him. In the darkness those walls were just another way of death.

The snort of a frightened steer came to him. For an instant, against the blaze ahead, he could see the animal's head and spreading, razor-pointed horns outlined. Then the steer flung himself about, and ran bellowing past the mound. He was followed by another and another. To run from the blaze meant to risk trampling by maddened cattle; to stay where they were was certain death by fire.

He seized the girl's arm and dragged her to her feet. "Quick," he ground out between his teeth. "We've got to run for it."

They ran, crashing through brush,

stumbling, breathless—angling toward the ravine which ran like an irregular indentation across the top of the mesa and gave it its name. There was a chance that the fire might not jump this division. If they could make it . . .

The flames were halfway to them now, leaping high and traveling fast. The roar of them was a song of menace in their ears.

It became obvious suddenly that they had no chance of making the ravine. Shrewdly, Kling had fired that edge first. The flames were racing along it in a crimson torrent.

SMOKE, acrid, billowing, drove into their nostrils, cut at their throats, set their lungs gasping and choking. A windborne spark sailed high and dropped to earth in front of them. An instant later, a small tongue of flame sprang up from the grass where it had fallen. Other sparks, Jed saw, were setting up other blazes about them.

"The cliff!" he choked, and turned, running toward the precipice.

Panting, stumbling, the girl ran with him.

Behind, the heat of the flames was suddenly like a tangible force, beating at their backs, ripping through their clothes. Smoke dipped down on them, murderous, enveloping, then lifted, swaying and whipping in the wind.

There was a faint cry behind them, and the sudden, ripping noise of gunfire. A slug chunked into the ground to one side of them. Evidently a rift in the flames had shown their running forms to the gang behind them. At that range—some two hundred yards—the sixgun must have been held well over their heads, yet one, at least, of the bullets had come too close for comfort.

It was a reminder, barely necessary, of Kling's ruthlessness.

Ahead a wall of darkness showed, barely penetrated by the glare from the fire—the edge of the cliff.

Standing against it, snorting, trembling, shifting, were the forms of cattle. Jed knew that some must have gone over already. These others would surely do so in a few moments. Now, frantic, they milled about, running in circles, forming a barrier to the only possible chance of escape.

He fought to increase his pace, hand on Alicia's waist, lifting her ahead, the agony of his ankle a pain so long endured as to scarcely get into his consciousness. His right hand sought his gun, slipped it free of leather.

A steer, backed against the black edge of the cliff, faced them head down, bawling. Jed's gun spoke once. The animal spun and disappeared over the cliff.

Three times more the gun spoke, clearing a space before them. Then they too were at the edge, peering down into nothingness.

For an instant, their fire-dazed eyes made out nothing, but then as the roaring flames swept in on them, lifting high, Jed's eyes flared with sudden hope. What would have been impossible in the dark was becoming possible because of the firelight. He

could see a way down the cliffside.

The heat from behind was an unendurable inferno—the air scorched his lungs. Their way showed luridly to where a ledge ran, shutting off the view below.

A long tongue of flame licked out from the cliffedge above them. Jed jerked the girl down to the ledge, then held her hand as she felt for a foothold over the edge.

A wall of fire reared suddenly at the edge of the cliff, bringing with it a heat so blasting as to make it seem that life could not endure in it. The flames licked out and down, hungrily, flared up, diminished, howling, as though furious at being cheated of their prey.

Then suddenly the heat was no longer unendurable; the wall of flame became a mere hedge of orange, died down to a flickering ribbon, smoldered into redness. That parched grass and brush burned out almost instantly.

Exhausted, panting, scorched, they crouched there, clinging to one another, content to know that they had escaped the most horrible of all deaths.

Yet another death still waited for them, and Jed was first reminded of it. In the east, he saw, there was a faint, pale light. Dawn.

They could not yet hope to make their way back over the smoldering mesa top. And it was yet too dark to attempt going down below that ledge.

The pale band in the east intensified, burned to incandescence, showed sudden streaks of orange and red and gold. He crawled to the brink of the ledge and looked over. In the new clear light, he could make out a way to get down. It was steep, broken, and not too safe, but it could be done. On the plain below there was no sign of the others.

He turned swiftly to the girl, who was peering over at his side.

"Can you make it?" he asked. "It's about our only chance."

She nodded, lips pale but tight.

"Keep close behind me, an' grab hold of me if you start to fall," he said, and started down.

She did not fall, or even slip. Steady-eyed, set of face, she followed him surely.

Then, when they were two-thirds down, it came.

Three of them, Kling in the lead, appeared, followed by a fourth, with his arm in a bandanna sling and holding a gun in his left hand as though it were not very familiar to him there.

Jed realized that they must have been waiting in the brush below, waiting for him to get so close to the ground that he could not go back.

They came on steadily, not shooting, Kling with a set, snarling grin on his face.

Jed said, "You stay here," to the girl, and knew it was useless as he said it. He kept going down, not hurrying. They weren't in accurate range yet.

Kling began shooting first. He shot as he walked, deliberately, gun in his right hand, left gun in its holster. He was in range now, all right.

A slug thudded into the cliff by Jed's side. Another went wide to the left. He let his gun stay in its holster.

This was an old trick. If Kling could draw his fire now, he'd have the advantage when Jed's gun was empty or near it.

A BULLET ripped suddenly into the place from which he had taken his hand a split second before. He kept moving down. Below him, he could see the twisted carcasses of cattle lying on the rocks.

Kling emptied his gun and slowed his pace, shoving new shells into it. The two men with him pushed eagerly ahead. One of them lifted his gun. It was a good shot at that range. It ripped Jed's shirt.

Jed stopped climbing and his six-gun slid into his hand. He held it carefully, sighting. With the flat bellow of it, the man who had fired checked in his walk suddenly and looked surprised. Then he sat down carefully, holding his stomach.

The other man jumped aside and tried to take the scant cover of some bushes. Jed slid his gun back and began climbing down again.

Behind him, he heard the snarling crash of Alicia's gun, saw the hat jump from the head of the man in the bushes.

Alicia's gun spoke again and Kling stopped, hand snatching at his cheek. But Kling kept coming, his face a bloody snarl of fury, and he was shooting at Alicia now. Jed dropped suddenly, some twenty feet onto the two cattle below. The impact sent a wave of agony through his hurt ankle, and sent him forward so that his left wrist was sprained.

He yelled, "To me, Kling!"

The foreman was not twenty yards away. He swung his gun through an arc from the girl to Jed and fired.

The bullet fanned Jed's cheek. Then Jed felt his own gun buck against his hand and Kling straightened up, then pitched over on his face.

Jed ran toward the bunch of bushes where the third man crouched. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw that the fourth, with the sling on his arm had turned and was running. The man in the bushes shot three times, fast, and Jed thought he heard Alicia's gun again. A coughing sound in the bushes, then silence.

He heard Alicia's footsteps behind him.

Her face was aflame. "Rider's coming, Jed. It must be dad," she said.

Jed felt a weight in his breast. "This is the payoff then," he muttered.

"Why?" Her voice was indignant.

"I'll have to tell him the truth. I can't hide behind a dead man."

She came close to him. "No," she breathed softly. "We mustn't ever tell him the truth. Do you know why?"

Jed shook his head, wonderingly.

"Because," she murmured, and the soft curve of her breast nearly touched him now. "Because, when he and I fight about anything in the future, I don't want him to be able to tell me that my husband was a rustler."

And then Jed didn't care any longer who told anybody what or when. So long as this slender, soft form was there to appease the fierce hunger in his arms. ✪ ✪ ✪

HELD IN TRUST

by Dennison Rust

Bart Matthias traded the few years he had left—for a few seconds of glory.

BART MATTHIAS looked up from behind the counter of his dingy little crossroads store in Aspen. He couldn't see very well because he needed new specs. But he couldn't get them now, with the Cattleman's Trust due to foreclose—to kick him out of the place that he'd had for so many years. He squinted through the gloom, past the cases of rifles, the boxes of canned peaches and tomatoes. His thin hand went to his white-stubbled chin in a senile gesture of annoyance as the front door slammed.

"Well, Bart," boomed a voice. "You sell any .30-30 shells to Bud Werner last week?"

Old Bart could see now, all right. Orlan Slade stood there. Head of the cattle syndicate, Slade had just cleaned out the Aspen range. He'd bought out most of the little ranchers, and hard luck had hit those who wouldn't sell at Slade's own figure. There was some ugly talk, but nobody could get a thing on Slade—not when he owned the bank and, so folks said, the law.

Old Bart came to with a jerk. "W-why, no, Mr. Slade. Don't reckon I did. You see, I carry a special brand of shells. Some salesman came in couple years ago an' sorta loaded me up when I wasn't lookin'. The ranchers used to say that those shells wasn't much good, so I'd remember if I'd of sold any."

"I know, I know," broke in the big-chested syndicate head testily. "But you must of sold some to Werner. Here's why." He leaned over, tapping one fat finger on the counter. "My foreman was found shot in the back last night. He'd been talking to young Werner—quarreling with him a few hours before. Werner's .30-30 was fouled and an empty shell—the same brand that you handle—was found where the killer stood. Werner's been back of all this talk that I've been taking advantage of the small ranchers. He's in jail right now, waiting trial for murder."

Old Bart grew indignant. "Bud Werner never done it, Mr. Slade. He wouldn't do a thing like that. He—

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he's about the only one of the old bunch that's left around here since—"

"Since I came here to make this country a paying proposition," the big man boomed. He lowered his voice. "My lawyer tells me that shell is the best evidence we have that Werner's the killer. I want you to remember that he came in here and bought some shells a few days ago."

The old-timer shook his bald head. "No, sir. He never did—"

"Your memory's mighty bad, Bart. Remember, my bank holds your note for a thousand dollars. The store's collateral. Maybe it would sharpen your wits if we forgot about that foreclosure that's due. Does that mean anything to you? Ah—you remember a little better now, eh?"

Cold sweat broke out on the oldster's forehead. He trembled. Jobs were hard to get. He remembered last year when he'd made a trip to Denver. A line of desolate, broken old men, shuffling their weary way through the cold twilight—useless, unwanted wrecks, waiting for their bowl of soup and crust offered them by some missions. He remembered the cold feeling that, but for luck, he'd be there in that dreary line, too. Suddenly, now, fear had its grim clutch on his throat. He couldn't speak. But he nodded.

"Good!" snapped the big rancher. "We'll call you."

If ever a man went through hell, old Bart Matthias was that man. His thin body shrank; his faded eyes were haunted by the black act he was about to commit. Thinking of young Bud Werner in a murderer's cell, and of the hangman's noose that would so soon choke the life from his friend—who couldn't possibly have sent Slade's foreman over the Great Divide. The noose that old Bart himself would help to put around the young fellow's neck.

Bart Matthias was half sick and feverish on the day of the trial when Slade's hard-bitten cowboys called for the miserable old man and took him to town. They kept huddled around him while he was being herded into the jammed courtroom.

Old Bart kept his eyes to the ground. He didn't dare look up for fear that he might see Bud Werner, might see in the young rancher's eyes the scorn and contempt he so rightly deserved. The bailiff banged a gavel; Bart was jerked to his feet.

There was a buzz of talk as Bud Werner was led to the prisoner's dock. Then, clearly, like the ringing of a brazen gong, Bud Werner's firm voice sounded: "Not guilty, your honor!"

Old Bart shook a little at that. No one knew better than he that Bud wasn't guilty, that he couldn't be guilty. And yet . . .

The bulldog growl of the district attorney struck the old man like a physical blow: "And, furthermore, we are prepared to show that the defendant did, on August eighteenth, purchase the same make of shell from Bart Matthias. Call the witness . . ."

Weak, limp, limbs shaking, old Bart was helped to the witness stand, to perjure away the life of his blameless young friend. He slumped down there

as the talk went on, as a question was shot out to the thump of the district attorney's fist in one cupped hand.

Old Bart raised his head dazedly—and was staring straight into the eyes of Bud Werner. Bud's handcuffed wrists were on the edge of the dock, his hands clasped tight. And—strangest of all—Bud was almost smiling. There was nothing vindictive in the look he gave old Bart. Maybe he didn't know what was coming. . . .

THE effect of that trustful, friendly half smile on Bud's face was instantaneous upon the wretched old man who had been seeing and feeling the hate on his friend's face day and night for the past month. Suddenly the fear, the sickness of soul, seemed to drop from those thin, bent shoulders like a worn-out cloak. For one miraculous instant, old Bart Matthias became a man.

His cracked voice rose shrilly, indignantly: "Hell, no! Bud never bought any of them shells off me! You" —he swung a thin, trembling finger at Slade, who was leaning forward tensely in a front seat—"you tried to frame this kid because you couldn't get him off his land any other way. You even tried to get me—*me*—to string a noose around his neck! Why, gol-dang your—"

A gavel pounded. From somewhere in back, amid shouts and clamor, a six-shooter roared. And old Bart Matthias, once more a man, was down, struggling with the master of the Aspen country—Orlan Slade! Struggling to keep the pocket gun that was clenched in Slade's fist from blazing.

Behind him, old Bart was conscious that Bud Werner was crashing to freedom, though his hands were shackled. He heard, dimly, the shattering of window glass, the thud of a body landing outside and the roar of six-shooters, even as his own thin, gnarled fist slammed against Slade's jaw.

And then, somehow, both Bart and Bud were running toward their horses. . . .

Over the state line, safe in a hide-away among the blackjack and scrub willow, old Bart told his pitiful story to his friend. And felt the pressure of Bud Werner's hand upon his when he finished.

"We'll go back, yet," said Bud. "You proved that there was still justice in Davis County, thanks to your man-mettle. Hell, that wasn't no trial, pardner. We'll win out yet!"

And he was right. ✪ ✪ ✪

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233), of Walt Coburn's Western Magazine, published monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1950. 1. The names and address of the publisher, editor, managing editor and business managers are: Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. The owner is: New Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York; Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York; Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Harold S. Goldsmith, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 2nd day of October, 1950. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, State of New York, Qualified in New York County, No. 31-9506600, Certificate filed with: City Register N. Y. County, Commission Expires March 30, 1952. (Seal)—Form 3526—Rev. 2-49.

ONE BULLET TO GO . . .

by Foster-Harris

Sheriff Keg McDonald learned a grim lesson that day: Rather cut a man's heart out . . . than injure his pride.

THE white-hot sunlight atop the cutbank was murderous, and the recumbent man squirmed in torture and swore under his breath. Sweat was pouring into his eyes and his brains were frying. But he didn't dare seek the shade. If he caused a disturbance in the brush, the oncoming horseman would see it.

The approaching horseman was Sheriff Keg McDonald. In a moment or two he would clatter across the arroyo, up this side and into the surprise of his life. For ten bitter years the man on the cutbank had dreamed of such a chance as this, and now it was at hand.

He had a noose in his hand and his plan was simple. When the trail brought the sheriff almost directly below the vertical bank, the man above meant to drop the rope on him, bust him out of his saddle, and then land on him like a ton of lead. After which Sheriff McDonald would pay back something he had taken ten years before.

The hoofbeats of the lawman's horse were plainly audible. Taut as a bowstring, the ambusher lay waiting. He had to act with trigger speed when the time came. The instant the sheriff swung by, that loop must get him. The timing must be flawless. And ten years of hard prison labor do not exactly improve a man's speed and timing, as the waiting man knew well.

Luck favored him. The sheriff clattered past and the hidden man lifted himself at precisely the right instant. He could almost have touched McDonald's big hat with his fingertips as he dropped the rope. The unsuspecting officer didn't have a ghost of a chance. With a silent, vicious swoop, the rope had him, yanking him savagely backwards out of his saddle. He hit the ground hard, on the back of his head. When the roper above came plunging down, Keg McDonald did not move.

When McDonald came slowly back to dazed, aching life, he was tied hand and foot. The pitiless sunlight was a

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blinding glare on his face. He blinked agonizedly, turned his head. The rough face above him at first was only a dancing blur. Then his sight cleared and he caught his breath.

"Don't you know me, Keg McDonald?"

The sheriff stared. The face before him was lined, bitter. With its two-day growth of grizzled whiskers, it looked like the face of an old man. But those grim, smoldering eyes, like brown coals, were the same.

"Gentleman Jim Brady!" the sheriff said weakly. "Out of the pen! You've changed."

"Yeah." The outlaw's grin was mirthless. "The pen changes a man a lot, Keg. I been findin' that out. I'd of kept my promise and hunted you up a month sooner, but—"

He broke off, lifting his gnarled, twisted hands to stare at them with slitted eyes. "Ten years of what they give you down there sure changes a man's gun speed, Keg," he said tonelessly. "I been practisin' for a month. But it don't come back. And there's other things that don't come back, either. For example, a man's pride."

He broke off again, brooding. His eyes seemed to be looking right through the officer now and on into infinite space.

"Been just a little better'n ten years now since you busted me, ain't it, Keg?" he continued in a monotone. "Roped me like a damn calf and drug me in. Wasn't even worth takin' a shootin' iron to, was I? You hid there and let me start to stop that stage. Then you just dabbed your rope on me and dragged me like you might have a coyote. Dragged me, by God!"

"I suppose you think I oughta just shot you? inquired McDonald dryly.

"Yeah, why not? It would've been kinder." Brady's face was a gaunt, twisted mask of bitter emotion. "Just because you wanted to make a name as a hellbender, you set the whole county laughin' at me. You know what they called me, even in the pen? 'Calf-rope'! You made me out a fool and got me ten years. You didn't have any call to butt in."

"You were only tryin' to stick up the stage," reminded McDonald ironically.

"Yeah, and you knew why, damn you! I wasn't tryin' to rob it. I was only aimin' to get my own money back from that tinhorn gambler ridin' inside. He'd cheated me with marked cards. I had a right!"

The sheriff did not reply. And in a way, Keg McDonald now realized that what he had done as an intended act of mercy had really been needlessly cruel.

Reckless, likable Jim Brady had been proud—ready to trust his gun speed, his ability to take care of himself, in any company. His attempted stickup of the stage to get at the fleeing gambler had been characteristic.

Yet even so, it had been flat lawbreaking. Chancing on the scene, young Deputy Keg McDonald had impulsively roped the culprit instead of shooting him. It had done Brady no real physical injury. But to drag a man's pride in the dust, to humili-

ate him . . . Well, Sheriff McDonald knew better now.

Brady's voice was a whispering snarl. "Ten years ago you dragged me into hell, Keg. Now you're gonna learn what it feels like."

The sheriff drew a long, slow breath. His years as a lawman had taught him a certain fatalism, and he had never been a coward. But he was not a fool, either. The red gods of destiny had brought Sheriff Keg McDonald to a very bad spot, and he knew it.

GRIMLY malevolent, Brady's eyes held those of the officer for a long second. Then he got to his feet and vanished up the steeply pitching trail.

Left alone, the sheriff waited a moment, then began a silent struggle with his bonds. He had wriggled out of tight lashings before. But this time he didn't. Those knots had been tied by an expert. Keg McDonald got exactly nowhere.

He was still doggedly trying minutes later when he heard Brady laugh. Twisting, he saw the other man squatted at the top of the grade watching him.

"Enjoyin' yourself, Keg?" There was grim mockery in Brady's voice. "Too bad I can't let you spend ten years tryin'. But I got other plans for you."

He swung back over the top of the slope, immediately returning with two horses. One was the sheriff's own. The other McDonald recognized as a livery stable plug from Joe Moore's barn in Palomita.

As though sensing his question, Brady said, "Yeah, I was in Palomita, Keg. In there just this mornin', an' I rented this crowbait. But it won't do you no good—nobody recognized me. And besides, before they come lookin' for you, I'm gonna send you back to them. When I get through with you, I'm gonna load you across this jughead's back and let him tote you in."

Gentleman Jim Brady shifted the bridle reins to his left hand and set his right on the gun at his belt.

"Or maybe I'll just tell him drag you in, Keg. That might be better now, mightn't it? Except that they likely wouldn't never be able to recognize what remained of you, and I wouldn't want that!"

He stepped closer, deliberately drawing and palming the gun. "Will you stand bein' gagged and loaded on this horse peaceful?" he inquired. "Or do I bat you over the head? Take your choice."

He lifted the gun. And because there was no alternative, the angry McDonald submitted to being gagged with his own shirttail, loaded aboard the livery plug and lashed tightly in the saddle.

Brady stepped back, eyeing his work with sardonic amusement. "You and that there other hunk of coyote meat shore make a handsome pair, Keg," he drawled. "Sit tight now and don't ask questions. We're goin' places."

An hour and a half later they were in the dense monte of Portales canyon, just where the road from Barrows topped the rise and skinned through the gate-like slit that gave

the canyon its name. And here, while the silenced, helpless sheriff watched, Gentleman Jim Brady bent close to study the tracks in the trail, straightening at last with a satisfied nod.

"Well, here's where we stop a piece, Keg," he informed. "Reckon you better get off that crowbait now, before he drops dead. I'll likely be wantin' him to carry your remains in purty soon. C'mon."

He swung off the road into the brush and dismounted. Untying the rope that bound McDonald's feet together under the horse's belly, he unceremoniously hauled the sheriff down and prodded him over toward a juniper tree. Backing him against the trunk, he lashed him to it, with the same rope that had bound McDonald in the saddle. Then, with a grunt, he came around and tied Keg's own bandanna, bandit-fashion, around the officer's face.

"Be a nice stunt, if it works," he remarked and proceeded to break off additional limbs and brush to further conceal the captive from the road. Then he took from his pocket a ball of stout cord and bound McDonald's sixgun firmly to a branch of the juniper. The muzzle he directed at the road. Finally he tied a loop about the trigger, ran the cord back over the crotch of a limb and looked at the sheriff with that mocking grin.

"Sorta catch on now, do you?" he inquired. "Any time now the Palomita stage is gonna come bucketin' by. I've spent ten years payin' for a robbery I didn't commit. Now I'm takin' my pay for them ten years. This time I *am* robbin' the stage of that Palacios' payroll I know is comin' over. And you, Keg, are helpin' me to do it."

He tested his trip cord with a tug and then cocked the sheriff's gun. "When I hear her comin' I throw some of that top brush in the road and lay doggo on the other side, see? I yell at 'em to stop and pull this cord and you shoot at 'em. They can kinda make out to see you, or your head and shoulders anyways. So if they shoot at anybody it'll be you. And it's right possible you'll get killed."

Keg McDonald made a strangling, furious sound, and Brady laughed. "What's the matter, Keg?" he taunted. "Don't you like the idea of lettin' a two-bit convict drag you into a holdup? Mebbe you'll live to be toted into Palomita by this livery stable plug. With your mask still on and everything, so's people will know what their big, tough sheriff's been doin'. Actin' as bait for a stage stickup! You think they won't laugh?"

The sheriff was fighting his bonds now. His eyes, above the mask, were bleak, murderous. Jim Brady laughed.

"Reckon I better cache these ponies now and take a look," he drawled at last. "Wouldn't want this livery jughead bustin' loose and goin' in without you. I shore hope he gits to cart you in alive, Sheriff. Yes, sir!"

He laid the trip cord carefully down and vanished into the brush, leading the horses. The maddened Keg continued to rage futilely against the unyielding ropes. He knew, if Brady didn't, that he had just about one

chance in a hundred of coming through this alive.

THERE had been several mysterious holdups of the Barrows-Palomita stage in recent months. Not Brady's work, McDonald was certain. Sheriff McDonald had been able to find no trace of the masked bandits. Nor had he found out how they had learned when those rich strongboxes to or from the big Palacios mine were going over.

How Jim Brady could have learned of this secret payroll shipment today was a puzzle. But the sheriff knew it was correct—knew also that the stage company was today replacing easy-going Messenger Bill Koontz with a lightning shotgun killer named Quill Burley. Pledged to stop these stickups, Burley would damn sure kill the first road agent that stuck up his head.

And now, by Jim Brady's vengeful scheme, that "road agent" would be Sheriff Keg McDonald himself!

Small doubt of what Quill Burley would do when that pistol shot spotted the masked man in the brush for him. He'd cut loose, and then be potted in turn by Brady, from the other side of the road. Or, if by some chance Keg did escape death, he knew he'd never live this down.

Roped in like the greenest kid, made to help in a holdup! Made a laughingstock by an ex-convict! Sheriff Keg McDonald wrenched with renewed, desperate energy at those ropes.

When Brady returned he came on the run. Dragging brush across the narrow road with furious haste, he laid his trip cord beneath it. Then he whirled back for a last taunting look at the captive officer.

"They're comin', Keg." He grinned. "Better duck quick when you shoot at 'em now, or you may not get home alive. Road-agentin' is plenty risky." He darted back across the trail and vanished.

Half smothering from his exertions and the gag in his mouth, the sheriff went grimly taut. From up the canyon he had caught the faint clatter of wheels, the pound of hoofs.

He could not see the road, but, through the limbs, he saw the rock-rimmed slice of sky against which the coach would appear as it scraped through the gate. The six-horse team would have to be slowed down to take that and the sharp, brush-fenced curve immediately ahead. When they came around that curve, there would be the barricade in the road. The tug of a cord, the flash and roar of a gun. Then . . .

He drew a rasping breath. Jim Brady was coming back like a leaping flash. A knife glittered in his hand. He slashed the set gun loose and whirled toward McDonald.

A sort of furious helplessness was in his eyes, but his hurried voice still held that old, mocking tone.

"Just thought of an improvement, Keg. I can't have folks sayin' I let you git killed without a chance. I'm gonna cut your right hand loose and give you back your gun, with one shell. If you wanta plug that guard

before he plugs you, okay. If you're still too kind-hearted, why, it's your suicide."

He was working like lightning as he spoke, jacking cartridges out of McDonald's gun, freeing the officer's right arm from the elbow down. For an instant he hesitated, listening to the clatter of the fast-approaching stagecoach. Then he palmed the big Colt, thrust it frame first into McDonald's numb fingers and slid instantly behind him, snarling a last warning.

"Get that iron straightened out in your paw quick if you aim to use it. You can't get loose before that coach gets here, so don't try. And don't expect to use that shot on me, neither. I'm not gonna give you a chance. And when I crack down on that stage from somewheres behind here, you're gonna need it to save your own hide!"

A smoky glare in his slitted eyes, Keg McDonald twisted his head. He was still tied plenty tight. Not a chance to squirm around and spend his one cartridge on his captor. But he could see that V of sky which the coach would be blocking out in another few seconds. His fingers had worked the gun into shooting position. He had a surprise card now and he meant to play it.

Straining, choking against the rope around his neck, Sheriff Keg McDonald watched the gap. He saw the bobbing heads of the lead team come, then the top of the coach. High on the box, the driver and messenger were plainly outlined against the sunlit sky. They were a good seventy-five yards away, and certainly they did not see McDonald, in his dusky concealment of leaves. But he could certainly put a crimp in Jim Brady's stage-robbing plans. With a strangling, exultant gasp, Keg McDonald swung his gunhand sideways and pulled the trigger.

He had tried to put the bullet well over their heads. But it must have gone much closer, for he saw the driver, Jeff Miller, duck violently. The new, gunfighting guard, Quill Burley, was clearing for action without wasting a split second. They were warned.

Now if Jim Brady got that payroll, he'd be doing fine.

Sheriff Keg McDonald tried to laugh. The gag stopped that. But he could hear Brady's outraged cursing, somewhere behind him, and it was music. "Why, damn you, Keg! Damn you . . ."

And then something unforeseen happened.

The stage team surged forward. Quill Burley was swinging a sawed-off. Just before the leaves hid them, the amazed sheriff saw a flash of metal in Miller's hand, saw him twist and strike with the speed of a striking snake. The driver, slugging his own guard!

Instantly the leaves hid them. There was a scream, chopped short. Dazed, Keg McDonald saw the stage come whirling crazily around the curve. The driver was alone on the box now, fighting the reins. Jim Brady was plunging forward through the thick brush. And Jeff Miller was stopping!

DELIBERATELY ridding himself of his guard, stopping for a holdup! He had spotted the masked McDonald now. He called out to him, in an excited, angry voice.

"That you, Dave? What the hell's the idea! You like to shot me. There ain't no passengers and I told you I'd take care of that damn guard, if they put him on. What the hell you—"

His voice died in a thick gurgle, for a black gun muzzle was staring him in the face. Behind it, the unmasked face of Jim Brady grinned up at him with a set, chill grin, like the fleshless grimace of Death.

"God!" Jeff Miller jerked hysterically. "'You—you ain't—"

Brady's voice slashed at him savagely. "Ain't who you was expectin'? No. But we'll take that strong-box anyways. Hand it down. Quick, you hear?"

Like a drunken man, Jeff Miller turned, pawing suddenly in the boot behind him. He was so shaken he could not control his hands. Twice he tried to hoist a squat, heavy box and twice it slipped back. The third time it came clattering down over the wheel.

Already panicky, the horses needed no further encouragement. They plunged crazily. The stage jerked. Brady leaped high, clawing for Miller's ankle. He caught it, wrenched hard as he bounded back. And Jeff Miller pitched sideways with a high, piercing wail.

The team was running away in dead earnest now. The coach bounded out of sight. Surging frenziedly against his bonds and beginning to win a little slack now, the captive sheriff saw Brady scuttling back under the thick, roadside brush, dragging the strong-box. Amazement and a certain hard admiration flickered in his eyes as he looked at the sheriff. He spoke rapidly, still with that old, half-mocking note.

"Rope you into anything and she always turns out plumb surprisin', don't she? What you wanta do now, Sheriff? Stick around and see who was that double-crossin' driver expectin'?"

He laughed as McDonald lunged savagely against the ropes. "All tied up that way, Keg, they'd be kinda liable to get you, don't you think? Got a feelin' it's not safe here, ain't you?"

He whirled and was gone into the brush. Keg McDonald continued to struggle. The weakened ropes were giving and his free hand was a mighty advantage. From somewhere down the road lifted a snarling, angry yell.

It was save himself or perish now, and he knew it. Brady wasn't coming back. With his loot under his arm, Jim Brady would now be getting away in a tearing hurry, leaving his enemy to face the music.

He could savvy several things now that hadn't been so plain even five minutes before. Treacherous Jeff Miller had simply been playing in with the road agents. He had expected to meet them here in the canyon. Something had delayed them, or they had set their trap a little farther down. And chance had brought Jim Brady and his captive into their place.

Now, warned by the shots and the careening, driverless stage, those stickups would be coming hotfoot to see about this. And if they found Keg McDonald here . . .

Yanking crazily, Keg got both hands free and ripped the smothering bandanna and gag from his face. Brady had taken his gunbelt, but fodder for his Colt was lying right at his feet, in the shells Brady had jacked out.

Once free and in the brush, Keg not only would chance these other road agents catching him—he also aimed to bear in mind one Gentleman Jim Brady. Sooner or later he would again meet up with that hombre. When he did, Brother Brady would have no cause whatever to complain about Keg McDonald not shooting him, sudden and plenty.

He thought he heard a stick crack somewhere to his left as he jerked loose the rope about his waist. Only his feet were tied now. He clawed at the knot with frantically hurrying fingers. . . .

But suddenly he froze. He had heard nothing, but instinct was warning him, screaming in his brain. Somehow he knew what he would see, even before he lifted his head—merciless eyes looking at him from the brush and the silent, thrusting movement of a gun.

Deadly tense, the sheriff waited for that powder flash he knew would be his last earthly memory. But none came. A flat, amazed voice said, "It's the sheriff!" Another voice said, "What the hell *you* doin' here?"

Keg did not answer. They were coming out of the brush now. Two of them. And from the faint, rustling stir of the leaves he judged there must be at least one more over near the road.

They were masked, but Keg was quite sure he recognized the foremost man as Dave Reed, hanger-on about Palomita's saloons. He was pretty sure he knew the other, too. Indian Joe Trent, a breed about whom Keg had long had suspicions.

"Drop that gun, Keg!" commanded the leader coldly. Keg obeyed.

NERVOUS, wary as a wolf, the other man was prowling about. Keg knew certainly he was the halfbreed, even before he spoke.

"Two men make track. Sheriff here one. Other drag box, go that way."

"Say, here's Miller layin' dead on the road!" called the third man angrily. "What the hell happened?"

"I don't know." Behind their slit holes, Dave Reed's eyes were bleakly threatening as he stared at the sheriff. He stepped closer, poising the long Colt.

"How come you're tied up, Keg? Somebody usin' you for gunbait?"

"You do your own guessin', Dave," snapped the sheriff and shut his mouth tight.

"Somebody tie 'um up, rob stage and run like hell this way, boss. Shoot 'um, damn quick, and come on. Fool around, all money get away."

"Hell, go on, boss, let him have it!" The third bandit came slithering through the roadside brush. "While

we're messin' around here, that other hellion's gettin' away. Stop his damn mouth and let's go. We got to get that other skunk pronto or—"

"Or what, fella?" From the thick monte a voice flashed out with the cold slash of a saber. "Claw sky! Reach, quick, or we'll blow you to doll rags."

Cursing crazily, the third bandit jerked back and froze. The halfbreed started to raise his hands. Dave Reed made a little, twitching move that brought him half around, and stopped short. There was silence then. And in it, Keg McDonald could hear his heart pounding like a running horse.

He knew that voice, but he couldn't believe it. Jim Brady. Back again, saving his enemy's hide!

"Slip your hobbles, John Law, and git to hell out of the way!" Brady's snarl galvanized McDonald into action.

Keg McDonald grinned and stooped swiftly. He was so nearly free that one hurried tug cleared him.

At that moment a gun bellowed savagely in the brush and McDonald heard Brady's savage grunt. Somebody screamed triumphantly, "I got him, Dave! I got the son!"

Dave Reed spun and snapped his first shot at McDonald. It missed. Keg McDonald too was moving like lightning now. He dived head first for the breed.

A trace slower witted than his mates, the halfbreed was just starting to bring down his arms when Keg hit him amidships. Locked together in a flying pinwheel, they crashed down into thick, thorned mesquite. And when Keg heaved up, he had Trent's sixgun smoking in his hand and Injun Joe Trent was dead.

There had been four of the renegades. Understanding pounded in Keg's brain as he swung the hot muzzle for a new target. A fourth gunman, skulking in the brush unseen had downed Jim Brady, but he hadn't counted him out yet. Over to the right, Gentleman Jim was still triggering, fighting an odds-on battle. He had dragged Keg into this scrap, but he had also come back to give him a fighting chance.

With a chill, fighting smile, Keg spotted that unidentified third hombre. He fired deliberately.

"All even-Stephen now," he murmured grimly. The sheriff was beginning to enjoy himself.

"Hang on and rattle, Jim! I'm sidin' you!" he roared and twisted to slide toward the roar of battle.

Then the whole world seemed to explode in a reeling blast of flame as Keg McDonald pitched forward. Like a nightmarish dream he saw the masked face in the brush, the stabbing flashes of the renegade's gun. Something stumbled across his legs. The snarling, sobbing yell of Gentleman Jim Brady sounded in his ears and somehow he knew the ex-convict was swaying over him, blasting down that renegade. . . .

The stinging slap of tree limbs against his face was the next thing McDonald knew. He could see, but everything seemed cockeyed, upside down, reeling and jerking crazily.

Then he realized he was being carried.

He was on Brady's back and evidently Brady was badly hit, for he staggered drunkenly. As though from a great distance, the sheriff could hear what he was saying: "Said I'd—send you back to town and I'm goin' to. I'm—"

Daylight flickered out again for Keg McDonald and next thing he remembered was Brady loading him into a saddle. Or trying to, rather.

ROUSED by the shaking, Keg protested groggily and got himself sworn at. He must have helped a little then, for suddenly a saddlehorn was digging into his stomach. The pain made him straighten up. The black fog in his brain was clearing now. He could hear Brady's panting voice, still giving him what-for.

"Hang on, damn you! You hear? You ain't shot bad. Just mainly a nick in your thick head and that oughtn't to hurt much. This bag of bones will take you straight to the stable if that livery man didn't lie. Your fool horse pulled his freight. Damn it, do I have to rope you on there, you big ox?"

The sheriff shook his whirling head. "But—but you, fella?" he croaked. "You're hit, too. Bad. And afoot. I can't just leave you here!"

"You ain't got nothin' to say about it!" A flare of anger crossed Brady's pain-hazed eyes, to be replaced instantly by a bitter ghost of that old, mocking grin. "Oh, yeah, that's right, you do have to think about catchin' road agents, don't you? Well, there's a lot of dead ones layin' around here you can send after. And—and as for the money . . ."

Very slowly he stooped, groping in the undergrowth. "Here, damn you! Might as well take it along," he said, and tried to hook the handle of the strong-box over the saddlehorn.

And then, like a crumpling sack, Gentleman Jim Brady started to go down.

Just how he managed it, Sheriff Keg McDonald never afterward clearly remembered. But he must have twisted and caught the sagging man's shoulders. Somehow he must have contrived to pull the limp body up and across the saddle.

They came into the road. And from there until the hard-riding posse met them, Sheriff Keg McDonald's head was practically clear. He knew it must have been, because the story he told was so near the truth it never had to be changed.

"Stage come in empty, did it?" Keg McDonald grinned waveringly. "Well, cool down, boys. Here's the money. And back up the road you'll find some awful dead hombres.

"When Brady here told me he suspicioned somethin' funny was gonna happen back yonder, he practically had to drag me over to see. But he was damn shore right. He gets the credit for endin' that crooked bunch.

"Here, handle him easy, boys! He's bad hit. But there's a thousand dollars reward money for them road agents he downed, and by grab, he's gonna live to spend it!" ✪ ✪ ✪

PERILOUS CARGO

by Ray Nafziger

The trader's trail to Adobe Settlements was no place for a girl, but Lisa was headstrong, willful —and she'd be damned if she'd let her life be saved by a reckless fool like Lon Cardamon!

A COLD wind made a rippling, tawny sea of the grama-turfed mesa, but Lon Cardamon, riding with his thin body racked by fever, did not feel its chill.

Lying up at a ranch, and attended by old Santiago Baca, Cardamon had lost thirty pounds from his six feet of hard flesh. He had still been desperately sick when word came of the wagon train of traders starting for the Dobe Settlements. Promptly, Lon had dragged himself from bed and dressed, punching a new hole in his belt before he could draw it up tight.

At the ranch they had warned him that Santiago would bury him somewhere along the trail, but no fever could keep Lon from joining that train. A Cardamon had been with every trader caravan to the Settlements since Lon's father and his partner, Amos Galt, had taken in the first wagons. Besides that, in this train was a tenderfoot named Calvin Hanford.

Below him, crossing a swale, Cardamon saw now a dozen wagons, tarpaulins over their heavy, careening loads, each drawn by four horses. The rumble of the wheels was music in Lon's ears. He had been cradled in the big vehicles of his father's trading caravans.

Cardamon checked his horse, and old Santiago, brown and seamed of face, pulled up alongside while their pack mule, loaded with beds and chuck, fell to grazing. "I must be seeing things, Santiago," said Lon, "but the long, stringy gent piloting that outfit looks like Funeral Sells. Wasn't he supposed to have killed and scalped the relatives of his Mex wife to turn them in for the bounty offered for Apaches?"

Santiago's brown face split in a snarl. "*Si*," he said. "Funeral Sells."

"And the man on that bay looks like Jared Wilmot, with Injun Dugger trailin' him, and eight renegade gunmen ridin' along—Chester, Harrell, Bill Quick, and that crew from Smoky

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Wells. A polecat bunch bound for the Settlements with a few wagons of trade goods. All for why?"

Lon's thin hand went down to draw out of its scabbard the Winchester with its stock bound with rawhide. Holding it across his saddlehorn, he rode on. It was well to have a gun ready when you met Big Jared Wilmot and his two men, Funeral Sells and Injun Dugger. Owner of a string of trading posts, Jared had been for years a sly enemy of Lon Cardamon's father.

Funeral Sells, his gaunt frame clothed in black from high cowhide boots to sombrero, waved his hand jovially at Lon. Sells was the sort to smile in your face and bury a knife in your back.

"Tenderfoot name of Hanford answering rollcall in this outfit?" inquired Lon.

"Yeah," said Funeral. "He's the fella on the bay mare. Owns the three wagons with the dapple grays. Fresh from St. Louis a few months ago. His daughter is along, too. She's a beaut, but the froze-up kind. Even Wilmot can't warm a smile outa her, but he's got bets up he gits more'n a smile afore—"

Lon Cardamon didn't hear the last. He was riding on with Santiago at his side and their pack mule following. Wilmot, a wide-shouldered man in his thirties, rawboned, darkly handsome, with a French and Spanish blood mixture, stopped his horse and stared. Injun Dugger and the other eight riders pushed up behind their boss.

"Look like you been sick, Lon," said Wilmot. "I'd be glad to loan a shovel to your *mozo* to bury you."

"I was just wonderin'," observed Cardamon, "why you polecats are horning in on the Settlements' trade."

"It's a free country, Lonny boy. With your pa and Amos Galt both cashed in, I figured to step into a little easy money."

"A free country, as you say," agreed Lon. "But Don Diego Orantes keeps the Settlements Mexicans peaceful. You'd hardly need eight gunmen to help you trade with him."

He studied Wilmot, Dugger, and the heavily armed men behind them, and rode on. There had been a rumor that Don Diego Orantes had found placer gold over in the Settlements country. A lot of it. Maybe the word of that gold was drawing this blowfly bunch.

Eight old wagons of the twelve in the train, he saw, were Wilmot's. They were drawn by crowbait horses, driven by teamsters who fed more whip than grass and grain. The next three wagons were new, each drawn by four dapple grays, resplendent in shining new harness. Alongside them rode a man Lon knew must be the pilgrim, Hanford. He was fifty or more, soft and pale, with the look of a man who had done all his trading indoors. Lon judged him the type of man who, listening to the song of the wagon wheels, did not hear the music but only figured what profit their revolutions were making him.

"You're Mr. Hanford?" asked Lon, pulling up. "My name is Cardamon, son of Norton Cardamon. My father

died at Fort Clay three months ago."

"I heard that," said Hanford curtly. "When he died he owed me two thousand dollars which I'd advanced him in merchandise from St. Louis."

"His last word to me was to pay you back," stated Lon.

AT MENTION of payment of the debt, a little light sprang into Hanford's pale blue eyes, only to die as he sized up Lon Cardamon's meager outfit. "Did you bring the money?" he asked ironically, "or are you returning the goods?"

Lon's thin, fever-flushed face turned a shade darker. "Neither. I came to say you will be paid, and meanwhile I'm offering to go with you to the Dobe Settlements, to give you what service I can. I've been there on trading trips, and I know the people and Don Diego Orantes of Hacienda Bonanza very well."

Hanford sneered. "It was once the law, I believe, that a debtor or his son had to give himself as a bond servant when a debt could not be paid. You look too weak to even lift my harness on the horses. Anyway, I have all the teamsters I need and I can do my trading without the help of a tramp rider. I lost two thousand dollars by trusting Norton Cardamon. Being cheated out of money is nothing new to me."

"Cheated," growled Lon Cardamon, "is a hard word. I wouldn't let anyone but a fool pilgrim pass that word about my father. As for working for you, I didn't expect to apply that on the debt. I was only offering help to a man who once did my father a favor."

Hanford snorted contemptuously and rode on, sitting stiffly in the saddle, new like his harness and wagons. After Hanford came a rider Cardamon had noticed fleetingly before—a girl, and undoubtedly the daughter whom Funeral Sells had mentioned. She wore a divided skirt, and rode astride like a man. She was blonde and blue-eyed like her father—a pretty girl, except for the spoiled petulance of her face. Her nose was in the air as she rode by Lon and old Santiago.

Cardamon looked after her thoughtfully. The girl had the easy balance of a cowboy in the saddle, although she had come only a few months ago from the East with her father. Her mother, as he happened to know, had been the daughter of Norton Cardamon's partner, Amos Galt, the noted old Santa Fé Trail trader.

Santiago made an insulting gesture toward the back of Calvin Hanford. The old Mexican, who had served Lon's father as *caporal* for the senior Cardamon's many trader caravans, would have died for Lon. Give old Santiago a horse, tortillas, frijoles, tobacco, a Cardamon to serve, and he asked nothing else.

"Now, where do we go?" he asked in Spanish. "I think you should go back to bed."

"We're going the same place we started for—the Dobe Settlements. It's a long road, and for tenderfeet it's bound to be a damn sight longer. Specially in company with Wilmot."

The last rumbling vehicle of the train, a careening top-heavy old wagon, was drawn by four stout little mules. The driver was an energetic, grayish old tadpole, Mike Gahagen, an old friend of the Cardamons. Identifying Lon, Gahagen swarmed down over a wagon wheel.

"What hit ye, lad?" he demanded. "Ye are nawthin' but a scantlin'. Ye was fatter when ye was fifteen."

Lon grinned. "Can you use a coupla swampers, Mike?"

"Kin I use the company, ye mean, of two honest men in a wagon train of polecats?" returned Gahagen. "It's ivery mornin' I'm expectin' to wake in me blankets with me throat cut. Don Diego Orantes is in more danger from this murtherin' lot o' Wilmot's than he iver was from Apaches. On top of that, we started three weeks late for travel to the Settlements. Lad, ye should be in bed under a roof. We'll run into rain and snow and cold up ahead."

Lon grinned. "Wilmot offered Santiago a shovel to bury me," he said. "But there's never yet been a caravan to the Settlements without a Cardamon."

THE train spanned out at sundown at a waterhole, where Lon, Santiago and Gahagen camped together. The dozen wagons moved in a line during the day, but there was no other evidence of unity. The Wilmot riders, teamsters and swampers had their own camp, as did Hanford. Each outfit picketed or herded its horses instead of one night wrangler looking after all the teams, the usual way.

The following day, at the noon halt, Lon and Santiago ran into the Hanfords.

"Still trailing us, I see," sneered Hanford. "Waiting for a chance to offer us your invaluable services?"

"You wouldn't believe it, but I know where I could get the money to repay you," returned Lon.

"Why not ride after it, then?" demanded Hanford.

"I'm afraid you wouldn't be alive when I got back. I don't want any man to die saying my father owed him money."

"Me die?" snapped Hanford. "You're impertinent, young fellow."

"Maybe," Lon admitted carelessly. "But at your age a tenderfoot has no business taking this trip. If your heart happens to be weak, the high country ahead isn't going to help it any. If you want to turn back, I'll take charge of your wagons and handle them as I would my own."

Hanford, his face mottling with rage, stared at Lon. As it happened, Hanford had an enlarged heart. "My health is my own concern," he blustered.

Lon shrugged. "It's your game; deal it as you like. I'm handing you advice which might be worth more than my father owes you. I'm also spooning you out some information. You're traveling in company with a killer-crook bunch—Wilmot and Dugger and Sells with the rest of those riders. Wilmot didn't come on this trip just to trade, but naturally you won't listen to a warning from the son of

a cheat. You may not be afraid for yourself, but you'd be wise to send your daughter back."

"That also is none of your business," snapped Hanford.

"Mr. Cardamon appears to know everything," said the girl, Lisa Hanford, sarcastically. "Mr. Wilmot has acted like a gentleman."

Lon shrugged and rode away, with Santiago following him. It was hard to remember that this spoiled daughter of Calvin Hanford was also the granddaughter of Amos Galt.

"Do not waste your time," observed old Santiago sagely. "Ride away and go about your business."

Lon Cardamon grinned. The fever still burned in him, and that afternoon the cold rain that began to fall made it flame higher. In the succeeding days, he ate little save broth from antelope that Santiago hunted and cooked for him. Lon had to admit he was a fool to continue with the caravan. As for the debt his father had owed Hanford, Lon could pay it easily enough.

Don Diego Orantes, owner of the Hacienda Bonanza at the Settlements, owed Norton Cardamon something over three thousand dollars. Lon could give Hanford an order on Orantes to settle Hanford's debt, but he wasn't taking that easy way. He was going with the wagon train, for one thing, to find out just why Wilmot was taking a cavalcade of gunmen with him. But the chief reason, he admitted, was to see whether Lisa Hanford turned out to be a Galt or a Hanford. That girl who rode so proudly on her grulla, Lon was gambling, had more than mere prettiness in her; she had real strength and depth.

And maybe it was only because the fever had him half out of his head, but Lon Cardamon was more than half in love with Lisa Hanford.

CHAPTER TWO

A THIRD of the way to the Settlements, the dim trail, unused for two years, was found completely washed out. Funeral Sells, as guide, chose a route over a ridge, although Lon Cardamon offered to show him a better one. The new road took work and Wilmot gunmen were not interested in labor. In the end, after a delay of a week, Sells abandoned the route he picked and followed Lon's advice.

"You don't need to," Lon told Calvin Hanford, "but you could take a hundred dollars off the debt. I've saved you that much in time, and I'd have saved you a lot more if you'd listened to me a week ago."

Hanford simply snorted, but his blonde daughter turned on Lon angrily. "You know so much," she said cuttingly, "they should appoint you captain instead of Mr. Sells."

"Yeah," agreed Lon, unperturbed. "They should—but they won't."

"Strange," commented Lisa Hanford. "And it's also strange that I don't like anything about you."

He grinned. "I don't like to brag how much I really know about wagon trains, but it hurts me to see one run

like this. I was trained by real traders, my father and a partner he had by the name of Amos Galt."

"Your father was Amos Galt's partner?" she inquired, her eyes opening wide in surprise. "Galt was my grandfather."

"That's one thing, at least, I can like about you," remarked Lon. "A grand old man, Galt. One of the best and most honest of all the traders in the Southwest. He freighted in free grub to more than one starving settlement. You should be proud of him."

"I'm not," snapped the girl. "He deserted his family to go wandering around the West."

"No. His family deserted him, refusing to come out here to join him. It was in his blood to live in the West; they should have followed him. Not that Amos Galt wasn't a tough old bird. He killed a few men and drank a few wagonloads of whiskey, but no one in Galt's family need be ashamed of him."

The girl looked at Lon Cardamon curiously. A queer faraway look came into this thin fellow's eyes when he talked of his father and Amos Galt—as if he were back, hearing the rumble of their big freight wagons crossing deserts and fording rivers, hacking a way through the living rock of mountains.

Funeral Sells, sniffing winter and snow in the air, speeded up the pace of the train and wore out the teams with long drives at too rapid a pace. By the time they came to the wide, flat depression known as Capitan Sinks, the teams were gaunted down. A recent rain had made the surface of the flats slick, and a dark sky threatened more rain. Sells rode blithely out on the sink, pointing a route straight across.

Cardamon rode up to the Hanford outfit. "Like to hand you another chunk of valuable advice," he said lazily.

"I don't care to hear it," snapped Hanford.

"Here it is anyway: Circle these flats; don't go through 'em. Another rain—which is due today—will make a lake out there, and your wagons will be bogged down."

"I don't care to hear your advice," snarled Hanford. "I consider Mr. Sells thoroughly competent."

Alone, Mike Gahagen, guided by Lon, pulled off to the right, circling the sinks. Before noon the sky opened in a deluge that caught the wagons of the train halfway across. An hour later, they were pulling through a solid lake. The wagons slogged on another mile before becoming hopelessly mired. Cursing, the teamsters had to abandon their wagons temporarily, unhitching and returning with the animals to the hills, packing along enough equipment and food to make an uncomfortable camp.

Cardamon, meanwhile, with Gahagen and Santiago, moved on steadily through the rain. Before noon of the second day they reached the pines of a ridge on the far side. They found good grazing for their jaded animals and camped. Gahagen's four little mules needed rest and feed. Santiago built a dry shelter for Lon.

THE rain stopped after two days, but it was a week—by dint of much cursing and whipping of mud-coated teams—before the other wagons reached the same piney slope. Calvin Hanford glowered as he passed, but his daughter rode by with her head held high.

Lon chuckled. The few days' rest had done him good. It had been either kill or cure, and the fever was gone. It was only a matter of time until he gained back his thirty pounds.

It was now Calvin Hanford who became ill from the exposure of camping out by the lake. As they moved on, his daughter gave him all the care of a trained nurse, attending him night and day.

During the day, Hanford had to ride in a wagon on a pile of blankets, over country that steadily became rougher and more barren. Little scattered mountain ranges walled in malpais valleys. There were as yet no ranches in here, but outlaws occasionally holed up in the mountains.

"A place to offer some of my valuable advice," grinned Lon Cardamon, and he rode across to the Hanford tent. The Easterner was lying in bed, with Lisa reading to him by the light of a smoky lantern.

"More advice?" she snapped.

"You guessed it. About horses this time. There's a bunch of breeds in this country who are not above stealing horses. We're going to stand guard on our animals, and we'd be glad to throw in yours with our bunch."

"My men can look after my teams," Hanford declared arrogantly. "Once and for all, keep your advice. I don't want it."

Two mornings later, there was a great hullabaloo in camp. All of Hanford's grays had disappeared.

Wilmot and his riders and Sells, with Lon, Santiago and Gahagen, took the trail of the thieves and kept it for a few hours, only to lose it in a vast sea of malpais from which the horses could have been taken in any direction of the compass.

"You know what I think?" said Funeral Sells. "That Hanford will have to settle with the buzzards. They didn't steal 'em—just took 'em off and hid 'em. One of the outfit will show up in camp and ask a heap of dinero for bringin' back a bunch of horses he found. Nothin' to do but pay. What do you say, Lon?"

"I say you must be right," said Lon blandly. "You ought to know." Whereupon he headed back to camp with the party, only to quietly drop off with Santiago and Mike Gahagen to head west into a rugged little range where his father had once followed a gang of rustlers. They found the tracks of Hanford's big dapple grays heading up a tortuously twisting canyon and hazed on by five riders. Following the trail until dark, they camped, to take the trail again at dawn.

In mid-morning, they looked down into a canyon bottom which was quarters for a goat ranch, consisting of an adobe shack, goat pens and a pole corral. In the corral were the big Hanford grays. Four men, two Amer-

icans, two breeds, sat in the sun, their backs against the dobe wall of the house.

Leaving their horses, Lon's party dropped down the hillside. Nearing the house, they started crawling, but before they had a chance to get closer, the quartet went inside for an early dinner.

With Lon in the lead, they advanced through the brush until they were near enough to hear the clatter made by the men as they ate their tortillas and goat ribs.

Cardamon slipped around the corner of the house to the closed door. Mike Gahagen chose one of the two windows for himself and his .45-90 rifle. Old Santiago was behind Lon.

KICKING the door open suddenly, Lon crashed inside, six-shooter in his hand. At his appearance, there was instant confusion at the table. Men shoved back their chairs and dived snarlingly for their guns. Lon shot once, and a fat Mexican flopped on the table. His second shot caught a lightning streak in the shape of a young breed who managed to snap a shot at Lon from the hip. The slug sailed through Lon's sombrero just as he fired. The young fellow pitched on his face.

Mike Gahagen's ancient .45-90 meanwhile boomed like a cannon from the window, and another renegade, clawing for his gun, was blasted back against the wall to go sliding down it without a sound. Santiago, fearing he would be left out of the battle, hastily covered the remaining man, who had flung up his hands quickly.

Santiago hesitated, finger on his trigger, and Lon knocked up Santiago's gun. Whereupon the rustler dropped a hand swiftly to his pistol and tilted up his holstered gun, intending to fire at Lon. Gahagen's big gun shot him through the middle.

"A short hoss is soon curried," remarked old Mike Gahagen as silence fell in the room. "That was usin' your head, lad—savin' one to bury the rest. But ye should oughta knowed more'n to trust a snake."

"I wanted to make him talk about the part Sells had in this," said Lon. "Funeral, and maybe Wilmot, was in cahoots with this gang to make a little money on the side."

After Santiago had brought down their mounts, they started the stolen horses up the canyon, pushing along rapidly until, just at sunset, they came in sight of the wagon train camp. A strange Mexican rider was talking to the little knot of men at the wagons. Seeing the approach of the stolen horses, he clapped spurs to his mount and dashed away at top speed.

At once Sells drew his gun and began shooting at the rider, with Wilmot joining in hastily. Before their fire, the pony went down, sending the Mexican hurtling through the air over his head. Sells raced over to empty his gun into the fallen man.

"Now that bird sure won't be able to tell anybody his gang was workin' with Sells," Mike Gahagen remarked.

"Got 'em back, did you?" chortled Funeral Sells with a great show of

jubilation. "We sure fixed one of the highbinders. He was askin' a lot of money to find Hanford's horses for him. Where'd you find 'em?"

"As if you didn't know," said Lon. "Shucks, Funeral, can't you get up a newer scheme than this old squeeze game?"

Hanford, who in his anxiety over his horses, had left his bed and dressed, met Cardamon as he rode up. "That dead Mexican was asking a thousand dollars to bring back my horses," he told Lon. "You saved me just that much."

The Easterner was looking at Cardamon with respect for the first time. "I'm a fish out of water here in the West," he admitted helplessly. "Maybe you did know what you were talking about." He clapped his hand to his heart suddenly while his face grimaced with pain. "Maybe you were right about other things, too," he gasped. "My health."

Slowly the man pivoted, looking with sick eyes at the sun setting over distant snowy peaks.

"Father!" cried Lisa Hanford, running to him. "Is it another heart attack? You must go back to bed."

Hanford shook his head. "Not just another attack," he muttered. "The last one. I shouldn't have come on this trip." Another spasm of pain twisted his face, as Lisa and Lon eased him to the ground.

There, lying on his back, Hanford struggled to speak, managed to smile up at his daughter. "Lisa," he muttered, "I've been a fool. I shouldn't have brought you on this trip. Cardamon was right; you must go back. Cardamon, the debt your father owed me will be considered paid if you'll see that my daughter gets back safely. And if you'll take charge of my wagons, as you offered. Will you do it?"

"Yes," promised Lon Cardamon, and took the hand Hanford held out. Lisa was pouring a spoonful of medicine into her father's mouth, but Hanford was past medicine. The Easterner slipped out as the last edge of sun rolled down.

Lisa Hanford, with her arms about her father began to sob and Lon Cardamon started to help her up.

She jerked away from him. "I'm not going back," she declared. "And I don't want your help with these wagons. I want no one's help. I'll take them on to the Settlements myself!"

Jared Wilmot came over speaking soothingly and she finally permitted him to lead her away.

"Ye sure are poison to that high-steppin' colleen" said Mike Gahagen to Lon. "And for that matter, she's all same as poison to me."

"You're wrong," said Lon Cardamon thoughtfully. "I'm beginning to believe she's going to turn out to be the granddaughter of Amos Galt."

QUIETLY but resolutely, Lisa Hanford took command of her father's wagons when they rumbled on, leaving behind them a rock-heaped grave.

As they moved on, a queer change came over Lisa Hanford. A new

gravity appeared on her face, tinged with a certain bitterness, but she never murmured a word of complaint. Calmly, in the increasing cold, she met the hardships of the trail, refusing to accept favors from Jared Wilmot or any of the others. When one of her teamsters was hurt, she took his place on the seat of the jolting wagon, and after a few hours did a good job of driving.

The train was running into greater difficulties. The last faint signs of trail faded. Sells did not know the country but was unwilling to ask advice from Lon Cardamon. Instead, each morning the train waited until Mike Gahagen's outfit had moved out under Lon's guidance. Then the rest would line out in the tracks Gahagen left, spanning out for the night wherever Lon stopped.

Thus they came to Perez Plaza, a group of little hill ranches occupied by Anselmo Perez and a dozen relatives. From the blue grapes there the Perez family pressed wine and from the wine Perez distilled *aguardiente* with the potency of liquid dynamite.

Perez was indifferent to the trade articles they carried, but Jared Wilmot engaged him in a long talk, trying to purchase some of the brandy. But evidently no agreement could be reached, for when the train moved out of camp next morning Wilmot was cursing the Mexican for pricing his liquor too high.

Another week took them across a high plateau cut with deep canyons, which they crossed laboriously. Beyond this they climbed to a pass which gave entrance to the little folded mountains containing the Dobe Settlements. Snow fell as they entered the pass and Mike Gahagen offered to lay a bet that they would not be able to pull back out again before spring.

Lisa Hanford was bossing her teamsters like an old hand, and standing a shift at night-guard over the grays. As her grief wore away, she smiled often and occasionally burst into little snatches of the Spanish songs which she had learned from her Mexican teamsters. She was learning to speak Spanish, too. Lon noticed that as she rode she kept her eyes on the yellow ridges stippled with green juniper and piñon, as if she could not get enough of looking at them.

And Lon grinned and sang a few songs himself. To occupy his time, he took on himself the job of hunter, shooting and packing down enough quarters of deer to keep the train supplied with fresh meat.

"You're keeping account, of course, of the venison you bring us?" Lisa Hanford asked him coldly. "I want to pay for every pound. And of course I'll pay you for your services in bringing back our stolen horses. I want no favors."

"Of course not," agreed Cardamon. "But I won't charge for looking after you, as your father asked me. I'll see you get back safe, and be ready to give you help whenever you need it."

"I'll never need help from you," she returned, her eyes flashing. "And

I'd never take it, no matter what happens. Just when I think I might learn to like you a little, you make me hate you more and more. I can look after myself, I tell you."

Lon's smile broadened. "Give you a bass voice and a few cuss words, and I'd almost think I was listening to Amos Galt. You get your independence from him. He liked this country, too."

"Who told you I liked it?" she snapped as she rode away. "I hate it and everybody in it."

In a canyon that widened sufficiently for farming land, they came to Pena Blanca, the first of the half-dozen communities of the Settlements, the largest of which was Don Diego Orantes' Hacienda Bonanza. As the wagons rolled down the one straggling street, the people flocked to meet them, but the leader of the community, grizzled old Pancho Martinez, significantly drew in his belt a couple of notches and waved them on.

CHAPTER THREE

IDENTIFYING Lon Cardamon, Pancho rushed over to shake hands warmly and to explain that disaster had come to Pena Blanca that year. They had nothing to trade, he told Lon. A flood had broken the dam of their irrigation reservoir and their crops had all failed. They had even been compelled to move the remnants of their flocks. Next spring they would have to depend on Don Diego Orantes to supply them with seed. Already the Don had sent over enough grain to keep them in tortillas; their other food they would supply by hunting.

They would have to draw in their belts for the winter, said Pancho stoically. They could buy nothing from the wagons that year.

"Huh!" shouted Mike Gahagen. "You folks can't go naked. Men can't live without 'baccy. Look over what I got; take what ye need."

"You're going to trust them?" asked Lisa Hanford, who had listened to the talk.

"That's part of trading," Lon told her. "Real trading. Amos Galt once had over fifty thousand dollars owed him by people like these."

"If Gahagen can trust them, I can also," stated the girl. "He has only things for the men, but I have calicos, shawls and stockings for the women; sugar, candy and chocolate for the children. And toys for their Christmas.

Wilmot refused to deal on credit and took his wagons outside of the village to make camp. He and his men did not refuse, however, to attend the *baile*—the party—which the village gave for the two traders who were turning a winter which promised dire suffering into one of plenty. They would pay the next year with bales of wool and hides, with tallow and dried meat.

Early the next morning the train pushed on, eager to reach the big ranch of Don Diego Orantes, a few miles down the canyon. A snow which began early in the day held them up,

and turned into a howling blizzard by noon.

Lisa Hanford shivered and her face became red with the whip of the wind and the sleet.

"Don't be discouraged," Lon Cardamon told her as he rode alongside. "In a few days your wagons will be empty and you can go back home, to the East. To some city with warm brick houses and carriages instead of wagons."

"And men who feel at home there, too," the girl retorted. "Men who aren't so near savages that they can appreciate sleeping under a roof."

"Very fine for those who like that sort of thing," admitted Lon readily. "Soft nests for soft people. Amos Galt would have none of it."

Ahead, through the driving snow, they could glimpse the adobe walls of Don Diego's establishment. A huge building, able to house as many people as a small town, it looked like a fort. And it had been a fort a dozen times or more, providing protection for Don Diego and all the Settlements Mexicans during Indian raids. The savages had burned their stacks of hay and fodder, looted their houses, driving off their cattle and sheep, but always after the Indians had gone, Don Diego had provided the means for his people to start afresh.

Only once had the Hacienda Bonanza been near capture, when the Apaches had attacked suddenly during a fiesta on a night when the vaqueros and farmers and Don Diego himself had been drinking heavily of Perez Plaza brandy. The Apaches had all but swept aside resistance before the drunken men could be organized. Since then Don Diego had forbidden liquor to be brought into the Settlements.

In the middle of the great rectangle made by the walls, rose a great, square, three-storied tower, built to serve as a last defense if the outside rooms should be taken by savage enemies.

It had been the custom of Norton Cardamon and Amos Galt to make Don Diego's ranch headquarters for their trading, and people from the various villages flocked in to make their purchases and exchanges. Now when they halted before the front wall and the one gate of cedar logs, Don Diego's majordomo inspected the contents of the line of wagons, hunting for contraband liquor.

Coming to Mike Gahagen's wagon, the majordomo shook hands with Lon.

Permission was given for the traders to camp by the wall along the stream below the house. At sunset the big gate was shut and barred.

For two days the traders were kept cooling their heels in the falling snow, awaiting the return of Don Diego. Wilmot's men played poker by the fires, and Lon Cardamon looked at them often, puzzling why Wilmot had brought them.

On the third day, Don Diego returned with a little cavalcade of his vaqueros. The white-haired old Mexican had dried to leather and gristle, but on a spirited horse, dressed in

the gold-embroidered costume of a wealthy *haciendado,* no one could have more dignity. As an Indian fighter, he had kept off marauding savages and was looked on by all the Settlements Mexicans as a father. His word was law. Swinging by the wagons without a glance, he passed through the gateway. The stout cedar gate closed behind him.

A little later the majordomo brought out word that on the following day they'd be allowed to show their wares. The merchandise intended for Don Diego's family could be brought into one of the courtyards; the rest would have to be displayed in the snowy fields below the house.

At daybreak the traders began arranging their wares: bags of coffee and sugar, bags of coarse brown sugar, bolts of calico and some silk and satin and cheap jewelry. From Don Diego's big house his farmers and vaqueros and their families flocked, giving orders on Don Diego for payment.

The luxuries that would appeal to Don Diego's immediate family were taken in through the big gate at noon, colored candles, mirrors, little tables and stands, combs, mantillas and bright-colored blankets from Saltillo, all displayed in the courtyard about which Don Diego and his family had their quarters.

The Don came out and greeted Wilmot coldly. "After this," he announced, "caravans must send in first to secure my permission to come to my country. Señores Cardamon and Galt were different. I could trust them."

"This is part of the United States, and a free country," blustered Wilmot. "We'll travel in here when we please."

Don Diego's eyes narrowed to slits. "You will never come here again," he told Wilmot. "I have heard of you and I do not like what I have heard."

His stern old eyes fell on Lon Cardamon, and he crossed quickly to embrace him. "My majordomo did not tell me you were here. Always my house is the house of a Cardamon. I have heard of the unfortunate death of your father. I grieve over him as one of my best friends. The debt I owe him I will, of course, repay to you.

"But you are in bad company," he half scolded Lon. "Not only with these men, but with a woman. It is unheard of, that a girl should bring in trade wagons." He indicated Lisa Hanford, busily arranging her merchandise. "However, American women do not follow our ways. You are her protector?" he asked shrewdly.

Cardamon flushed a little. "Hardly," he said. "She needs no protector. She started with her father; he died this side of the Capitan Sinks. She is the granddaughter of Amos Galt."

"So?" said Don Diego. "That explains much."

Wilmot was using all his wiles to sell his merchandise to the women of Don Diego's household, but the choice offerings of Lisa Hanford attracted the most interest. Lisa had selected a great part of the contents

of her father's wagons, all intended to appeal to feminine buyers—face powders, perfumes, soaps, fine dresses and laces and knickknacks—which men traders rarely carried. There were silk spreads and coverlets from convents in the East, embroidered dresses for babies and small girls that brought admiring exclamations from the mothers.

LON CARDAMON had to admit the girl's shrewdness; she had inherited old Amos Galt's cunning. Knowing little of Mexicans, she had guessed well what would please them. There was no haggling as to the prices she asked; they were snatched up while a lean dyspeptic who acted as secretary for Don Diego wrote down the amount of each purchase.

When his household had satisfied themselves, Don Diego always made arrangements to exchange products from his ranch for payment. Today when the trading was finished in late afternoon, the majordomo appeared carrying a small rawhide sack and a pair of scales used ordinarily to weigh gold dust. Seated before a table placed in the courtyard, he calmly set about weighing out flour gold to pay the sums recorded by the secretary.

Lon Cardamon stared. The vague rumors that Don Diego had found placer gold on his lands were true. Lon glanced quickly at Wilmot and saw the trader gazing avidly at the sack. At once the purpose of Wilmot's journey with a small force of desperadoes was plain. This was no mere trading expedition; Wilmot had come for much bigger game—gold.

"I have been fortunate, as you see," murmured Don Diego to Lon. "I can pay my debt to your father in gold. I would not tell anyone else, but my men have washed out many sacks of dust. More thousands of pesos than I can count."

Cardamon looked at Wilmot again. "It might be best for you to be on guard," he remarked, nodding toward Wilmot. "Gold draws flies and even worse insects."

"I have poison for such," declared Don Diego, unworried. "Thirty-five fighting men in my house alone, besides the men in the villages."

Doña Mercedes Orantes had asked Lisa Hanford to remain with them. It was not fitting that a granddaughter of Don Amos Galt should camp unchaperoned with the rough traders. When the girl hesitated, Lon put in a word.

"Of course you'll accept," he remarked. "A chance to sleep under a roof again, to sit by a warm fireplace."

Lisa Hanford turned away angrily from Lon and graciously accepted the invitation of Doña Mercedes.

There was nothing suspicious in the actions of Wilmot and his men in camp that evening or at bedtime when Cardamon and Santiago and Mike bedded down under the wagon with a tarp stretched between the wheels to keep snow from blowing in on them.

Cardamon came awake abruptly before moonrise, sitting up quickly, and bumped his head on the heavy

axle above him. Noise was welling out from Don Diego's fortress-like ranch house. Evidently its dwellers were holding a *baile*, or judging by the loud shouts and singing of men, a drunken carouse. Lon thought back to the prolonged dickering that Wilmot had carried on with the distiller of brandy in Perez Plaza, and was half inclinded to suspect Wilmot had made a secret purchase. Yet the majordomo had examined all the wagons carefully. Don Diego must be losing his hold on his people to allow such a drunken disorder.

When a gun crashed suddenly, Lon hastily buckled on his six-shooter belt and hunted for his Winchester. Following the one shot, a dozen guns exploded to the accompaniment of loud yells.

The moon was pushing up over the ridge into a clear sky. Santiago and Mike Gahagen came awake at his side. Leaving them grabbing for their guns, Lon ran to the Wilmot camp to find all the bedrolls empty. The shooting was continuing within the walls. Racing back to the wagon to get Santiago and Gahagen, he ran into Lisa Hanford.

"What's happening?" he demanded.

"Wilmot. He sneaked in brandy through the help of the Don's majordomo. He must have bought a barrel at Perez Plaza, keeping it hidden in his wagons. There was an understanding between the majordomo and Wilmot. Almost every man in the place is drunk. Wilmot's bunch is inside; they've seized all the hacienda except the tower. The majordomo rushed in and advised Don Diego to surrender his gold. Don Diego shot the majordomo dead and got all his family into the tower. Wilmot is attacking them now. He's killed the men who tried to resist and locked in all the rest."

"But how did you get here?"

"Don Diego wanted someone to go for help. He couldn't spare any of the men and I offered to go. An old woman took me out through a tunnel under the tower walls. The Don asks you to get word to Pena Blanca, and hopes to hold off Wilmot until men can come from there."

"Santiago and Mike and I will make three more to help Don Diego. No, two. One of us has got to ride. Santiago, you're nominated."

"I'll go," offered Lisa. "That will leave three men."

"Up the canyon alone? Through this snow?" Lon asked doubtfully.

"I'm the granddaughter of Amos Galt. Saddle a horse for me!"

CHAPTER FOUR

THE rifles were crashing with increasing volume within the adobe walls. A room full of gold, one of the rumors had said, was in Don Diego's strong tower, and Wilmot would soon have it. Then he'd pack it on mules and ride out with his men, breaking trail through the snowy passes. There'd be no law outside to avenge Don Diego.

Or maybe Wilmot's gang wouldn't leave immediately. They could keep the peons drunk and stay on for a

few weeks, enjoying the luxury of Don Diego's house, with Don Diego's granddaughters and other pretty young women to entertain them—including Lisa Hanford for Jared Wilmot. Lon swore and ran for his horse.

Lon directed Lisa as he cinched on the saddle, "Jog him along a while, and then turn him loose."

"I know how to ride a horse," Lisa Hanford returned sharply. "Give me some credit. But you're taking long chances in joining the Don. They're trapped with only a few men and boys for defense. And if Wilmot wins, he'll massacre all of you. Why are you helping Don Diego?"

"My father and Don Diego were friends," Cardamon said. "They always helped each other in case of trouble. If Amos Galt and dad were here, they'd go in to help. In the West to be a friend of someone means going the limit for him."

"You and your West!" snapped the girl, as she mounted. And then from the saddle: "Lon," she called softly, "look after yourself."

Cardamon stood watching her ride away, bundled in a sheepskin jacket, plowing through the deep snow that covered the trail. Then he hustled to join Santiago and Mike Gahagen, waiting near the north wall with the woman servant who had taken out Lisa Hanford. This secret exit from the hacienda was not watched. The majordomo evidently had not told Wilmot of the passageway.

The servant, swathed in a black shawl, led the three into a thicket of brush where a flight of steep steps dropped into a stone cellar. From this led a narrow earth tunnel along which the woman swiftly led the three men. Through the pitch blackness of the passageway, which dipped under the outer wall, they hurried to emerge under the three-storied tower in the center of the house.

Here a trap door overhead opened for them, giving entrance to a room on the ground floor of the tower. Besides the tunnel, the only other entrance to the tower was from Don Diego's living quarters, a low-arched passageway which was closed by a massive block of stone.

Built with a four-foot wall, the structure mounted three stories, each smaller in size than the one below. Stairways connected them, and their walls were all slotted for rifles, narrow on the outer face instead of the inner. About the second story was hung a narrow balcony with a parapet.

Don Diego met the three in the darkness and ceremoniously stated his gratitude for their assistance.

"Miss Hanford has ridden to Pena Blanca for help," said Lon Cardamon. "That means about two hours for men to get here."

"*Si.* We will hold out that long," declared Don Diego calmly. The years had not dimmed the fire in his old eyes. He realized what a defeat meant: his death and the death of his sons and grandsons, the outraging of the women of his family.

Two of his sons had been fighting with him in repelling the attack; one of them lay badly wounded in an

upper-story room. Several grandsons, ranging in age from twelve to twenty, and a pair of old servants were manning the rifle slots as best they could. On Cardamon, Santiago and Mike Gahagen would have to fall the brunt of the defense.

FROM courtyards and rooftops about the tower, Wilmot's men hailed in shots. Scattered about the trampled snow of the courtyards lay the bodies of a dozen men, mostly liquor-befuddled retainers of the Don's who had been shot while trying to make a belated defense.

A lull came in the firing and Wilmot, from behind the parapet of a roof over the laborers' quarters, called on them to surrender. When Don Diego disdained to reply, a sudden rush was started by the renegades in the hope of gaining a foothold on the balcony which hung from the second story. Ladders had been made ready and after they were placed, Wilmot's Mexican teamsters and swampers started climbing.

Riflemen hailed lead at the loopholes on the same side to cover the assault. Lon, Santiago and Gahagen, hurrying up the spiral stairs to the second story, opened the door leading out on the balcony to meet the attack. The heads of the first men to appear above the parapet were in sight, and for a few seconds it was a short-range fight, pistols spurting death into the renegades' faces. Before the guns of the trio, four men dropped from the ladders and fell into the courtyard. Their fellows hastily retreated, hurdling the wounded men at the foot of the ladders.

Santiago's left arm, its flesh punctured by a slug, was dripping blood, and Doña Mercedes, who had acted as nurse in half a dozen Indian attacks, washed and bandaged it.

Entrance by way of ladders failing, Funeral Sells led a raiding party in an effort to break through the entrance to the lower story. After they had succeeded in pushing back the big stone that blocked the low-arched passage, they were met by Don Diego's grandsons, all fighting in the darkness with the bravery to be expected from the Orantes family. Helped by Don Diego and Lon's trio, they stopped the attack short, and levered the stone slab back into position.

From this short battle, Don Diego had to carry one of his grandsons to the hospital room. A dark hole in the boy's calf was pouring out blood. Later, if they won, Don Diego would probe for the bullet. It was an old story to Don Diego—bullets and powdersmoke and death striking at his loved ones. It was almost as common in the Settlements as roundup dust and the smell of hair burned by branding irons.

Again the guns made thunderous echoes roll against the distant canyon walls, and a hail of shots pitted the adobe or sailed in through the narrow slots. A wounded teamster of the raider gang was screaming with pain as he slowly crawled on hands and knees, desperately trying to cross

the courtyard. His yelling must have annoyed a Wilmot rider, for a gun was emptied into the man, stilling him.

Within the tower rooms, thick with powdersmoke, the handful of defenders bumped against each other in the darkness, wondering where the next attack would be directed. Guns began pounding savagely across the east court, from behind the parapet of a roof. Cardamon emptied his gun at the spurts of scarlet flame appearing momentarily. Then a long lull in the firing ensued and off somewhere on a hill a dog raised his voice in a long, quavering howl.

The big cedar-timbered gate in the outer wall creaked open, and a wagon was rolled inside by Wilmot's men. Wilmot was engineering some new mode of attack. Lon wondered if he was planning to fashion a flaming go-devil from the vehicle.

After half an hour, once more the guns started up briskly. The defenders gathered themselves to meet another rush, but instead the firing again died away to a short-lived silence.

Without warning a spray of bullets splashed against the walls, and from the southeast corner of the tower came a hollow boom, a great bellow of sound that started from the bowels of the earth and spread upward in a funneling roar. The whole tower seemed shaken to its stone foundations; then the southeast corner of the lower story bulged outward. The ground floor corner of the tower, undermined by a heavy explosion of gunpowder, slid into the courtyard.

Dust rose in a great billowing cloud, and the floor of the second-story room under Lon slanted steeply.

As the dust settled a little, Cardamon and Don Diego took stock of the disaster. The corner of the lower story had been torn away, leaving a high, gaping hole providing easy entrance into the tower. But so sturdy was the construction of the building that the second and third stories still remained whole.

Savage yells sounded from beyond the murk, and then, with guns roaring, a group of Wilmot's men dashed across a courtyard toward the hole left by the explosion.

Mike Gahagen's big gun and Santiago's carbine were booming by Cardamon's side as Lon brought up his Winchester across his hip and worked the lever swiftly. Don Diego and a grandson joined them.

Their combined guns flung back the rush, and they yelled exultantly in the first flush of triumph. Again the rifles stopped, and a silence held the big house until from the laborers' courtyard there came a protesting chorus of Mexican voices.

Lon realized what Wilmot's strategy was; he would haze out a bunch of drunken *mozos*, and possibly their women and children. Using them for cover, he would drive them ahead of his own men, as cattle and sheep are chuted into a slaughter pen.

It was the end, Lon Cardamon realized. He and Don Diego and the rest could not fire on those helpless

sheep; it would be a plain slaughter. They could only retreat to the upper stories and make a desperate stand that would not last long, once Wilmot had entered the tower itself.

The reports of the guns increased in volume. A dark tide of people rolled into a courtyard and came slowly toward the tower. Don Diego groaned. He tried to bring his revolver up, but let it drop, unfired. These were his own people.

Then from an upper story, one of Don Diego's grandsons shouted two words: *"Pena Blanca!"* Don Diego clutched Lon's arm. Between the crashes of guns came a steady thudding, the sound of horses galloping through the snow. Lon hurried the Don to a rifle slot that looked up-canyon and they saw a dark column flowing down the road. That column was the men from Pena Blanca, riding recklessly along the trail in the moonlight, the hoofs of their horses churning up the snow in a low cloud.

Wilmot also had seen the approaching force and now shouted to his men to close the outer gate. Lon turned at once, and with Santiago and Mike Gahagen at his heels, flung himself up the narrow stairs to the roof of the top story. They were high enough here to overlook all the courtyards of the big house and the timbered gateway in the outer wall.

Already four men, obeying Wilmot's order, were struggling to close the heavy timbered affair. Lon rested his rifle barrel on the parapet and flung two hasty shots at the little knot of men at the gate. They scattered, but returned as Wilmot cursed them back.

"That's it, lad," yelled Mike Gahagen at Lon's side. "Kape that gate open." His big gun boomed, and the attempt to close the entrance was hastily abandoned.

The first of the Pena Blanca riders reached the gate and spurred through in a wild charge. At once welled up an angry tumult of crashing guns and yells and the courtyard was filled with a confusion of wildly struggling horses and men.

Lon laughed for sheer joy of the battle. He clapped Don Diego on the back and grabbing up a gun, rushed downstairs. For he had seen in the darkness and the turmoil of snow and powdersmoke the forms of Funeral Sells, followed by Wilmot, rushing inside the gaping opening of the tower, seeking shelter from the bullets of the incoming riders.

Lon fell rather than ran down the twisting, narrow stairs. He hit the hard-packed floor at the bottom and crouched, his narrowed eyes probing the blackness. He waited tensely, his breath held, and then his ears caught a faint sound straight ahead, then the creak of an inner door.

His groping fingers found a small stone; he tossed it well over to the left and heard it hit the sidewall. Then came the lifeless chuckle of Funeral Sells. "Drop your gun and reach, feller! You ain't got a—" Sells broke off sharply as Wilmot's gun blazed from another corner straight at the spot where Lon had tossed the stone. Lon's lips twisted

slightly as he took careful aim, steadying his gun in two hands, at the flash of the .45. Then he pulled the trigger.

His gun clicked emptily.

He heard Funeral's croaking laugh; he saw the leaping flame from two gun-muzzles explode almost in his face as he sprang with all the strength in his body straight for the black-garbed renegade. He didn't have time to think of the searing bullet-tear in his shoulder, nor of the crushing weight of Funeral's gun-barrel, which scraped his cheek. He was fighting for his life, his own six-shooter barrel whipping down in a blind effort to connect with Funeral's head.

He felt, in a last weakening moment of struggle, the crunch of bone as his gun struck and struck again; then he lunged forward and down, his groping fingers aiming for the glint of metal on the floor. He reached, grasped it, as a shadowy form loomed above him. He heard the click of an eared-back hammer, and realized with a sudden sickening feeling of helplessness that he'd never have a chance to bring up the gun in his weakening grasp.

Lon never heard the gun that killed Wilmot, or the shouts of the Pena Blanca men as they rushed in over Injun Dugger's bullet-ridden body.

WOMEN began lighting candles in the various rooms; men began picking up the dead and wounded. A cloud of dust hovered over the hacienda, and everywhere was the acrid odor of burned powder.

Lisa Hanford, who had returned with the riders from Pena Blanca, saw Lon weakly get to his feet. She rushed impulsively toward him. She made no protest when he drew her close.

"You made a fast ride for a tenderfoot," he told her. "And now when you go back east you'll have a tall yarn to tell."

"But I'm not going back east!" she exclaimed. "I like it out here. I never want to return. This is my country."

"Would there be any chance," asked Lon, "that you'd care to stay here with me? I love you, Lisa. I fought it at first, but it did no good. Lord knows I've little to offer you—the life of a trader, traveling with wagon trains into rough country, running into plenty grief. And some day a big trading post, maybe here in the Dobe Settlements."

"That's a queer proposal," said Lisa Hanford with a laugh, "but it doesn't scare me. But supposing," she asked, "I told you I'd marry you only if you went back east with me?"

"Probably I'd go with you," admitted Lon Cardamon. "But I know you wouldn't ask it. I've seen your eyes when you were looking at this country. You've learned to love it, Lisa."

"The only thing I have against you," stated Lisa Hanford, "is that you know too much. But there are a few things you don't know. One of them is that I learned to love this country only after I found that I loved you!" ✪ ✪ ✪

WALT COBURN'S TALLY BOOK

Here, each month, Walt Coburn introduces us to some of the cow-country folks he knew and loved, the hardy breed who left the indelible mark of their strong and colorful characters upon the West.

I HAD been hearing tall tales about the jerkline freighter, Hardluck Smith, since I was a kid. But it was five years or more before I ever met him. Hardluck Smith was living out his own fabulous character, chanting his own saga in a leather-lunged voice along the deep-rutted freight road that twisted from the railroad towns of Malta, Dodson and Harlem, to the Little Rockies and the twin cowtown mining camps of Landusky and Zortman.

Hardluck Smith was the jerkline freighter whose twenty-horse team hauled his three loaded freight wagons and a caboose through the mile-long Phillips Lane to the Hog Ranch stage station. He never failed, even when the gumbo mud was hub deep and the axles made trail. He took the wagons through without unloading a pound or unhooking the canvas-topped caboose or a wagon, to haul them one at a time, even when the mud balled up between the wagon spokes and had to be chopped loose with an axe.

"There was ten cases of brand-new double-bitted axes," Hardluck would say, "a dozen axes to the case, on the freight load, billed to the hardware store at Zortman. Two-Dog Moore, my swamper, rigged up a pair of snowshoes to keep him from boggin' down, and chopped the gumbo mud from the wheels at every turn. He sweat off fifty pounds that day and had worn out every axe on the load when we pulled into the Hog Ranch. My twenty-horse grain-fed team was fat at the head of the lane. They come out all hide and hair when me'n Two-Dog pulled the harness off. It taken two years to put the taller back on. My wagon beds leveled off the grade through the gumbo lane and the county still owes me for the bill I put in."

Another time Hardluck Smith was hauling freight across Sun Prairie. "It rained day and night for a solid two weeks," he claimed. "I lost every horse I had. They wandered off the first night and I never found them. The gumbo mud balled up their tails

and as they dragged the mud balls along, it stretched their hides till their eyelids wouldn't close. They died from lack of sleep. I found their carcasses two weeks later." Hardluck Smith roared. "You don't have to take my word fer it. Two-Dog can take you to where their bones is still layin' and their tails still caked in the gumbo mud that's dried hard as Portland cement."

Hardluck Smith bragged that he was a gallon-a-day man, and any saloon man in the Little Rockies would profanely vouch for his drinking capacity. The freighters had a habit of tapping down a steel hoop on every barrel of whiskey they hauled, boring a small gimlet hole and siphoning it out into a water bucket, then plugging the hole and tapping the hoop back into place. They marked it off as "shrinkage." Hardluck Smith had by far the highest shrinkage of any freighter on the road.

When Hardluck Smith hauled powder, it was actually something to hear about. Two-Dog Moore was scared to death of the cases of dynamite sticks and explosive caps and the black metal tins of blasting powder. Only stark loyalty to Hardluck Smith kept little Two-Dog from quitting the country. He always threatened to take his two shepherd dogs and go back to herding sheep, but in the end he went along.

I never thought to ask if the freighters got paid more for hauling powder. They should have. Especially Hardluck Smith, who handled the dangerous stuff as if it was so many cases of canned tomatoes, or the black cans held nothing more dangerous than black pepper.

Two-Dog told it for Gospel and no man in that part of the country, knowing Hardluck Smith, ever called him a liar. He told how the wagons bogged down on the Rolling M flat on the Circle C range. Hardluck cussed his swamper out for a rank coward and got up on top of the load and heaved case after case of dynamite sticks and black cans of blasting powder off the wagon to lighten the load. One wheel had to be jacked up and the muddy ground gave way under the heavy jack. Two-Dog gouged out a hole underneath the axle and Hardluck shoved a case of dynamite sticks under the jack and told Two-Dog to "Jack 'er up!"

Two-Dog quit the flats that time and took his sheep dogs along, leaving Hardluck to do the job, and he did. When the freight outfit moved on, the swamper came back. Hardluck left the case of dynamite sticks buried in the gumbo mud of Rolling M flat and there they still remain, for all any man knows.

But mostly I would hear tall tales about the personal habits of Hardluck Smith. He stood well over six feet, rawboned with rough-hewn features. His yellow hair and beard were long and matted. He bragged that he hadn't washed his hands and face in years. Only when the rains came was his hide washed. And nobody ever denied it. His sweat- and dirt-caked shirt and overalls were glazed and the color beneath lost.

"There was only one time," the giant freighter would tell it, "that I ever tackled the job of washin' up. That was when a shore purty schoolmarm showed up at Zortman or Landusky, I fergit which. One look at her and I aimed to marry her. I know'd it'd take more'n soap and hot water to get down through the crust, and while the blacksmith was shoein' my horses I took one of his new rasps that he used to scrape down the hoofs and began workin' on my hands. I wore out three rasps before I give it up as a bad job. I reckon ol' Hardluck was never meant to be tied to no woman's apron strings."

THE first time I ever met Hardluck and his swamper, Two-Dog, was early one morning when Jake Myers, the Circle C wagon boss, and I were on morning circle on the fall roundup. We sighted the freight outfit on the road and headed that way. Smoke came out of the stovepipe of the canvas-topped two-wheel caboose hitched to the end wagon. I could tell by the load that they were hauling canned stuff and flour and sugar on one wagon, whiskey and cases of beer on another wagon. The end door of the caboose was tied back and Hardluck was getting breakfast. Two-Dog was out wrangling the horses.

One look at the big yellow-bearded man in the dirty red-flannel undershirt told me that I was looking at the fabulous Hardluck Smith. His voice sounded like an old bull as he bellowed at us to get down and have breakfast.

The outfit was dry-camped on a high, wide bench. Jake and I squatted outside on the ground, Jake with the whiskey bottle Hardluck had handed him and me with an opened quart of Budweiser because I was too young to drink hard likker. There was the smell of strong coffee and bacon, and flapjacks cooking in bacon grease. Two-Dog opened a can of strawberry jam and Hardluck hollered to "come and git 'er." There was a high stack of browned flapjacks and we helped ourselves to a stack. I was hungry and that strawberry jam was a luxury. I gorged myself and was washing the last of them down with coffee when Jake broke the silence.

"Them's the best buckwheat cakes I ever ate, Hardluck," Jake said, getting up.

"B u c k w h e a t, hell! We're drycamped." The yellow-bearded face split in a wide grin. "I used last night's dishwater to make them flapjacks."

Now mebbyso Hardluck was having one of his jokes, but most mebby he wasn't. I saw Jake uncork the whiskey bottle and take a drink. I rode the rest of the morning with that bait of dishwater flapjacks like lead in my belly.

Hardluck told it in every saloon in the Little Rockies and it was always good for drinks on the house, because Jake Myers was always jobbing somebody and this time the josh was on him. I didn't count.

But I never aimed to get even as Hardluck always claimed I did. It

happened two winters later. Hardluck was hauling cordwood to the power plant below the Little Rockies where the Alder Gulch and Ruby gold mines were located. It was about twenty below and the snow deep and he had the wagon gears on bobsled runners. The cordwood was piled high and he was riding the bull board, which stuck out one side about six feet, his blacksnake whip coiled around the neck of his mangy old coonskin coat.

I was headed for a winter line-camp and I'd hit the Landusky road a way back for easy traveling through the snow drifts. I had a beer bottle filled with kerosene for the lantern at the line-camp in each pocket of my angora wool chaps. As I rode alongside, Hardluck spotted the neck of the bottle of colorless stuff where it stuck a third way out of my pocket. He grinned and spat out the chew of tobacco from his mouth.

"Alky!" His eyes lit up like blue flames. "Alky!" He reached out a long arm quickly and yanked the bottle from my chaps. Before I could open my mouth to warn him, he'd pulled the cork with his teeth and tipped it up. I watched the first gurgle as the stuff went down and saw his Adam's apple bob up and down a couple of times before I rode away at a lope.

Hardluck had one of the farthest carrying voices I ever listened to and I could hear him a mile away where it echoed through the frosty air in the scrub pines.

I dreaded the next meeting with the big yellow-whiskered giant. I'd heard a dozen versions of the way he told it. He'd drunk the quart before he took time to get the taste of the kerosene. For a week, he claimed, he didn't dast light a cigarette or stand near an open flame. He backed away from the stove till he damn near froze to death. And he told what he'd do to that short-complected Circle C kid if he ever caught up with him.

I met him in Dutch John's saloon and before I could back out the door he reached out and collared me. He poured enough drinks into me to last a lifetime and into himself and everybody that came into the saloon. It took half a month's pay to foot the bill. And it wasn't coal oil.

The days of the jerkline freighter are gone forever, along with the tinkle of the bells on the hames—the red, white and blue ivory rings that decorated the harness. The rough, tough, hoorawing men, whose hearts were as big as the bucket Hardluck used to catch the whiskey shrinkage, are gone. too. The last time I saw Hardluck Smith and his little swamper, Two-Dog Moore, was on the road from Malta to the Little Rockies. The Circle C ranch was located on the old stage road. When I rode away from the home ranch that day, I was leaving it for the last time. We'd sold out to the Matador outfit. I was almighty low in spirits and, as the Indian says, my heart was on the ground.

I twisted around in my saddle, at the place in the road that crossed the dam at Rolling M flat, where I could look down at the green hay meadows

and the old log buildings and pole corrals of the home ranch, and was taking one last look at it, when I heard the jingle of sleigh bells and saw Hardluck Smith's twenty-horse freight outfit coming around the bend.

Hardluck stopped the outfit and opened a sealed bottle and we had our last drink together. He left me the bottle and I watched him walk up the line of his twenty-horse team, starting with the wheeler team, calling each horse by name in his bellowing voice. The chain tugs rattled as each team tightened up, and then his blacksnake popped. "Tighten up! Git a-movin'." The wheels creaked and I watched till they were out of sight.

It was the last jerkline outfit I ever saw. ✪ ✪ ✪

WORD OF HONOR • • • •

ABNER PERSONS, convicted horse thief, was serving a ten-year sentence in east Texas when he was released on parole by a kind-hearted warden in order that he might spend the Christmas holidays with his aged and ailing mother. No one had any doubt that Ab, a model prisoner, would keep his word to return when his leave was up. They were not disappointed. On January 2, 1883, exactly at the appointed hour, Ab galloped faithfully back to jail—riding a stolen horse!

DOMESTIC DESPERADO • • • •

PROBABLY there were more marshals, detectives and sheriffs on the trail of Sam Bass than ever chased another bandit in the entire West. Soon the wily Bass became famous for his skill in using disguises, boldness, trickery and bravado in outwitting his pursuers. Only once was he caught without the slightest show of fight or effort and that was in a stagecoach on the rocky El Real Highway. A daring lawman swung aboard the loaded vehicle and thrust a triumphant gun into the bandit's back. Sam paid him only slight attention. He was very busy—changing the diapers of a four-month-old fellow traveler!

DISGUISE • • • •

ALTHOUGH the luxuriant red beard of Harry Falso, California bank robber, was a dangerous mark of identification, he stubbornly refused to have it removed. Instead, he hired a personal barber to live near him in his Five Acres headquarters and imported from Chicago some $500 worth of hair oil. One day, as he slumbered in the barber's chair, two of his drunken riders pushed a razor through the red locks that were the chief's pride and joy and, giggling, left his chin and head as smooth as an egg. A few minutes later, a troop of cavalry, led by two federal marshals, swooped through town looking for Falso. They missed him. "Not a red beard in town," they reported disgustedly. "Only a bald, funny-looking gazook asleep in a barber shop!"

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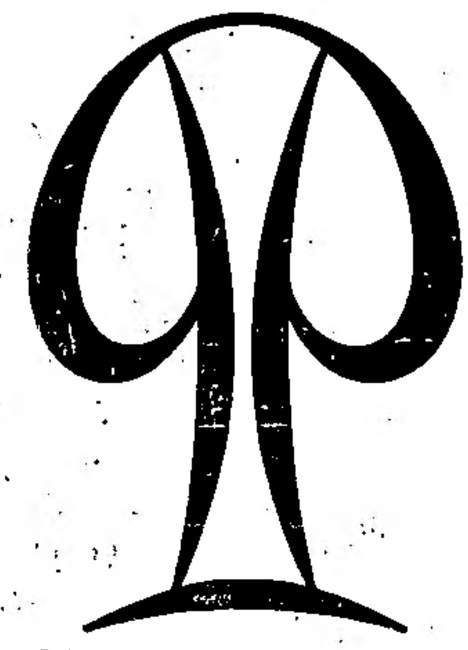

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